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Hao Da Yi Juan Wei Sheng Zhi
THE VILLAIN'S
White Halo

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THE VILLAIN'S
White Halo
NOVEL
1

The Villain's White Halo

NOVEL

1

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The Villain's White Halo (Novel) Vol. 1

Published originally under the title of《反派白化光环》(The Villain's White Halo)
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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
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ISBN: 979-8-89561-116-6
Printed in Canada
First Printing: December 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

晋江文学城
WWW.JJWXC.NET

Chapter 1

THE COLORS OF TWILIGHT drew to a close, and the last few rays of the setting sun spilled through a giant floor-to-ceiling window. As the dappled light passed through the glass and into the darkness, it only highlighted the emptiness of this space: the office.

Liu Xiaodai, a sales intern, sat hunched over his desk. Half dead from boredom, he toyed with a glass marble, tossing it up in the air and then catching it. He counted the seconds to the end of the working day.

A sudden wind gusted through the office. Stacks of brochures swept into the air like so many oversized butterflies, their pages rustling loudly.

Liu Xiaodai shot to his feet with his eyes wide, though he nearly toppled his swivel chair in his haste. A brilliant light flashed in the shadowy depths at the end of the hallway. The air around it rippled like a pool disturbed by a pebble, and the faint silhouette of a person gradually solidified within. The contours of the figure grew ever more distinct, until the form of a man—tall, upright, and a little thin—took shape just as the light faded away.

Step by step, the man emerged from the hallway. His stride followed a mysterious rhythm that beat to a time known only to him. At last, he came before Liu Xiaodai, his face unobscured. His features was delicate but handsome, and he wore a stoic expression.

Liu Xiaodai had met many extraordinary characters working here at this company: the noble and stately, the charming and elegant, the unbridled and proud, the aloof immortal and the bewitching enchantress. Any

imaginable sort of allure, from light to dark, he had seen them all. But never anyone like this.

Although the man before Liu Xiaodai was not the pinnacle of beauty, the depths of his eyes were as vast and deep as the ocean. He seemed otherworldly, as distant and detached from the world as the clouds, despite his close proximity.

If Liu Xiaodai's coworker, the veteran poser Cheng Xiaobai, were still at the office, he'd slap Liu Xiaodai across the face. *Wake up, Xiaodai,* he'd say. *He's nothing but a top-tier faker—can't you see the roasts spamming his mental display?!*

As if he had really been slapped, Liu Xiaodai regained his composure. After all, this could be the very first sale of his career!

"Welcome, welcome!"

He shot out a hand in greeting then realized just as quickly that the newcomer couldn't touch him at the moment, much less shake his hand. How impolite of him. He withdrew his hand and pushed the swivel chair over instead.

"Please have a seat, sir. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Liu Xiaodai, a salesperson in the Villain Department of the Rebirth Company… No, wait, I should've introduced the company first. Sir, any guest who walks through our doors is the work of fate. Our company lives by the slogan 'Specializing in rebirth for thirty years—there's a perfect life out there for you!' Would you like to hear more about it?"

Liu Xiaodai picked up a colorful brochure from his desk, blew the dust off it, and presented it to the newcomer with both hands.

"And how should I address you, sir?" Liu Xiaodai asked.

The man languidly sat down. There was a profound tranquility in his eyes and his voice was surprisingly warm.

“I am a villain,” he said.

The answer left Liu Xiaodai at a loss for a moment, before he tentatively clarified, “I meant… May I have your name?”

A trace of melancholy flickered across the man’s face. “Ever since I can remember, I’ve been transmigrating through various stories. From school dramas, to wealthy family feuds, to palace intrigues. Business wars, showbiz dramas, wuxia… I’ve changed names and identities so many times I’ve lost count. My lines remain largely the same, and my role hardly varies. I can only read the scripts after I die each time, and I’ve realized this is all there is to being an ‘extra’… In any case, I am a villain.”

The man demonstrated excellent manners; he sat upright and spoke in an unhurried voice. Liu Xiaodai was a little stunned. So far, he’d only shadowed his seniors during his internship and he certainly never encountered this sort of situation before.

The Rebirth Company’s boss, Bi Muning, had left “gateways” in thousands of dimensions, and if it was fated, the spirits of the dead would pass through these portals to arrive at this company. In exchange for what they wanted, they would pay with a part of their souls. The restriction on these gateways automatically excluded certain souls; for example, those with enormous power, immense aggression, or severe resentment. As the boss liked to say: “It’s good to make big money, but you gotta be alive to enjoy it.”

At first, Liu Xiaodai thought the man before him was some big shot cloaked in good luck, which would explain his refined, almost tangible

soul. But it appeared he was actually this way because, for unknown reasons, he had been tempered through repeated transmigrations.

The man noted Liu Xiaodai's pause. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Of course! How could he not? Clearly, the man was one of the many dead among "XX delivered a palm strike, instantly killing a pile of the XX sect's disciples"!

But that didn't matter as long as there was profit to be made. Liu Xiaodai swiftly adjusted his expression to apply the broad salesclerk's smile he'd practiced a million times. "Mister Villain, how can I be of service to you today?"

The man cast his eyes downward and pointed at the brochure with a slender finger. "I can order anything on here?"

Liu Xiaodai felt as if he'd been jabbed with a shot of adrenaline. *Oh yeah, it's on!*

"Naturally! The standard rebirth package is 20 percent off, and counterstrike plans are 10 percent off. If you bundle the plans, it's 11 percent off the total, but I'll add an extra 3 percent discount to that. We also have a tailor-made 'Villain's Counterstrike Package' that's included in the Rebirth Company's deluxe credit plan!"

"I want to be a Final Boss—the ultimate villain. Is that possible?"

A huge order! Liu Xiaodai was so excited he stumbled over his words. "O-of course! We also have the 'Fiend Halo.' It allows you to kill gods and obliterate the divine. Anyone will cry in fear from a single look!"

The man frowned and hesitated. "Isn't that like writing 'I'm the bad guy' on my face?"

Who could expect him to reflect the nuanced and multifaceted nature of a villain in that case? It was simply unprofessional.

“Not at all, sir,” Liu Xiaodai was quick to explain, the appeal of such a massive first sale sparkling behind his eyes. “To activate it, the halo requires you to perform standard villain expressions like ‘cold sneers’ or ‘sharp glares’ and say standard villain lines like ‘I was never a good person to begin with.’ Though there is the off chance that it activates randomly, of course.” He pushed forward to close the deal. “How about it, sir? Would you like one?”

The man smiled. “I’ll take a dozen!”

“Excellent choice, sir. The company is having a promotion right now, so I’ll even throw in a counterstrike package for free.”

To Liu Xiaodai’s surprise, the man shook his head. “No, I don’t want to counterstrike.”

It was a baffling response. Liu Xiaodai was sure his eyes were ready to pop out of his head. What kind of villain didn’t want to counterstrike the hero in this day and age?!

“But, sir, it’s literally free. We—”

“I know, thank you,” said Mister Villain, cutting him off for the first time. “I really don’t need it.”

Liu Xiaodai wanted to push a bit harder, but he remembered what his seniors had advised, which was to respect the customer’s wishes. Reasoning he had already made the sale, he nodded.

“Then, sir, is there anything else you need?”

“Can I choose the world I go to?”

“Oh, that’s the tech department’s area of expertise.”

***

NIGHT HAD ALREADY FALLEN outside the office’s floor-to-ceiling windows by the time Liu Xiaodai brought his client to the tech department. The tech intern, Wang Wei, was just packing up to leave for the day. Before he could shut off his machine, Liu Xiaodai darted forward and stopped him.

“Hold your horses, hero! I’ve got an order!”

Wang Wei’s eyes shimmered as he turned toward the newcomers. After a long-winded explanation from Liu Xiaodai, Wang Wei nodded vigorously in agreement.

“To be a proper villain, it’s very important to pick the right protagonist. I just so happened to come across a pretty good one earlier when I was flipping through channels.”

He guided the two men toward a floating screen suspended in midair. Displayed on it was an expansive azure sky that stretched above rolling emerald hills. Hawks soared and cranes called amid the glow of sunlight while mist roiled between the hills. Among the vibrant shades of green, a tiny, lone figure in white robes stood out.

As he walked down a small mountain path, the hems of the man’s robes were dampened by morning dew. Suddenly, a woman dressed in scarlet appeared in the opposite direction. She hurried along the path, her head bowed, and accidentally bumped into the man’s shoulder. She

stumbled from the impact, but before she could fall, a pair of firm arms caught her.

The man confirmed the woman was fine and elegantly stepped back to maintain a respectful distance. His expression was gentle, and his faint smile glowed like warm, shining jade. Witnessing this tinted the woman's fair cheeks with a shade of rose. She lifted the hem of her skirt to continue her descent down the mountain, though she frequently glanced back over her shoulder.

"Just look at him—that poise, that bearing, those looks. That's the makeup of a protagonist, no doubt about it! How generous of him to help a stranger without fear of being scammed. What a moneybags." Liu Xiaodai marveled at the sight.

Wang Wei couldn't have agreed more. "These days, eight out of ten protagonists become villains for vengeance, and the ninth becomes a yandere that's totally beyond help. I'm telling you, a sincere, righteous protagonist from a proper background is even rarer than a three-legged toad!"

Liu Xiaodai nodded in agreement. If Mister Villain chose a protagonist like this one, it would take only minutes to defeat the guy, even without the counterstrike package.

The man took a step forward as he watched the screen with rapt attention, like he was trying to discern how the man in white resembled a toad.

That was so cliché, he thought to himself. *No, that melodramatic meet-cute was so over the top, even calling it 'cliché' is giving the author too much credit.*

Despite his unflattering thoughts, he reached out a hand to the screen…and a blinding light erupted before his eyes!

“Oh, crap, I forgot I connected that thing to the transmigration machine!” Wang Wei jumped at the sudden turn of events and ran to shut the machine down, but it was already too late. The man’s form was rapidly fading.

“Wait, sir, your halo!”

Liu Xiaodai grabbed a gleaming white circle sitting on the table and hurled it at the screen. The object transformed into a streak of light, shooting into the man’s body. Moments later, the screen turned off. The dust settled and all returned to stillness once more.

“Does this count as a completed order?” Wang Wei mumbled after a brief silence.

Feeling a little guilty, Liu Xiaodai said, “I…think so? Anyway, I can’t believe that us two interns would have a chance at handling such a major sale!” A thought struck Liu Xiaodai and he jolted. “Quick, connect to that world again and see what’s happening!”

“All right, okay. Huh? Wait! I can’t connect. The gateway is closed…”

Chapter 2

WHICH DESPAIR-FILLED QUAGMIRE contained the foulest recesses in the world?

Was it the Swamp of Nebulous Dreams where one might tumble into the miasma and become entangled by the venomous vines; the Floating Sea where hurricanes twisted the waters into crushing tidal waves; or the depths of the Mighty Mountains where ferocious beasts slept ready to awaken at the slightest murmur?

Despite the extremely dangerous nature of the locations listed above, those with high cultivation and treasured weapons could escape them all with a one-in-a-million chance of survival. But among such perilous places, *none* could compare to the dungeon under the Cangya Mountains.

In the depths of the vale beneath that great, rugged mountain range lurked an entirely different caliber of beast. A long, narrow tunnel descended into an endless abyss. Every few feet, copper oil lamps cast flickering light, and each tiny flame glinted like the eyes of a predator in the nigh-impenetrable dark. No bloodstains from torture smeared the grounds, and no piercing cries or wailing filled its halls—only heavy silence mantled this grim cavity. Darkness blanketed the surroundings, such that the only sound was the never-ending drip-drop of water. Plip-plop, plip-plop, again and again, repeated cyclically countless times. Even the guards that rotated shifts every six hours stood wooden and wordless. Neither night nor day, neither cold nor heat existed here. There was only emptiness and silence.

Many things could drive people to their deaths; loneliness was one of them.

The omnipotent who manipulated power on a whim, the ruthless who killed for pleasure, the once-promising youth who committed a grave error, and the wicked heretic whose cultivation remained unmeasurable… In this place, they were mere prisoners.

However, if the imprisoned had to be categorized, they were so divided: those who had been judged and those who had not; those with visitors and those without. And the chance of visitors was slimmer than the prospect of seeing the sun.

Aside from the fact that the dungeon was a restricted area in the Cangya Mountains that only the highest in status could request the right to enter, the mountain range itself had another unique feature. The deeper one descended, the stronger the oppressive might of the mountains grew. Martial cultivators felt their bones and tendons strain under the pressure, spiritual cultivators experienced qi blockages, and ordinary cultivators became as weak as mortals. Even the guards, trained for years to withstand the pressure, could endure only half a day before their bones and muscles succumbed to aching fatigue.

At that moment, the oppressive feeling changed.

The still, thick air was shattered by footsteps that resounded throughout the silent tunnel. They were steady, powerful, and echoed without pause. Their pace was unhurried, as if the path was an open road rather than an underground prison that daylight never touched. As a shadow passed one towering lampstand, lambent flames illuminated the stranger’s visage.

It was, astonishingly, a woman.

She possessed an elegant valiance and emanated the sharp, cutting aura of a martial artist despite her lack of weapons. Her brows were straight and sharp, her nose was prominent, and she was dressed in ochre-red fighting gear. A high ponytail contained her ink-black hair.

Yet Liu Qishuang was not as calm as she appeared. In truth, she had no idea whatsoever how to face her shidi,[1] Yin Biyue, who had committed a serious crime. Since she immersed herself in cultivation, she had never been adept at socializing, let alone using her words. Even so, she felt she *had* to come.

Xihua Peak was unlike the others that occupied the Cangya Mountains. Despite their honorable master's extreme renown, he had been wandering the world for years. In fact, since her eldest shixiong,[2] Jun Yu, had accepted Yin Biyue into the sect on their master's behalf years ago, he had yet to meet him. The disciples of Xihua Peak were few and far between, and each cultivated in isolation. It wasn't uncommon for half a year to pass without crossing paths with each other. But no matter how shallow their relationships, they belonged to the same peak under the same master. Liu Qishuang didn't want to see Yin Biyue's road to enlightenment cut short here. Her impression of him was of a gloomy and reticent boy who acted more mature than his age. She hazily recalled that he was very gifted, and prior to entering the sect, he was the top scorer on his mortal school's final exam.

The guard leading the way stopped, which pulled her from her wandering thoughts. Silently, he cupped his hands at her in salute and gestured for her to proceed before he took his leave.

She approached, focused her vision in the dim light, and saw the prisoner locked behind the robust bars forged from West Sea black iron.

This was her second time scrutinizing him with such care. The first time had been the sect entrance ceremony three years ago. At the time, the youthful boy kept his head bowed until his name was called. When he looked up, his eyes were like a viper waiting to strike—dark and unfeeling. She never understood why Jun Yu suddenly took Yin Biyue in on their master's behalf, but Jun Yu always had a reason for his actions.

She had attempted to show care as Yin Biyue's shijie,[3] but he didn't seem to need it. He never interacted with anyone, nor had he encountered any hurdles on his journey of cultivation that required him to seek out aid. As time went on, fewer and fewer people were willing to talk to him.

The boy inside the dark cell was sitting cross-legged on the floor. When he sensed her arrival, his pale form slowly rose to stand. The metal shackles fettering his hands and feet clinked softly. He took a couple of steps forward and gave her a slight nod.

"Ershijie,"[4] he greeted her, then said nothing more.

It occurred to Liu Qishuang that he was not even twenty. The traces of youth still lingered on his brow. He was a mere fledgling, especially when she considered the long lifespan of cultivators. Even in the mortal world, he'd be at an age where school would force him out of bed early in the morning to study. He must long for fun. Instead, he was inside the most harrowing prison in the world.

At a loss, she could only recite what she had already prepared: "The sect leader said you plotted to kill Luo Mingchuan and thirty-two other disciples within the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament. Is that true?"

The young man's head snapped up, his eyes a tumultuous mix of incredulous shock and bone-deep sorrow—emotions so intense they burned like a raging fire. But like candlelight flickering in the wind, the look was soon extinguished, and he cast his eyes down.

"Yes," he said in a low, rough voice. "It was me."

His admission was a near-silent sigh that reverberated in the dungeon. The young man looked as if he'd built an invisible wall to isolate himself within, caging him in profound loneliness. He would not explain. He didn't think anyone could help him.

Liu Qishuang was deeply shaken. Suspicion and heartache crashed over her like a wave. Was there more to the case that she didn't know? But the sect leader was not a dishonest man…

No matter how high Liu Qishuang's cultivation, she was still a woman, and a woman's maternal instinct was a scary thing.

"Shidi, if you have been wronged, just tell me," she blurted before she could sort her thoughts. "Don't worry about a thing. Even if Shifu is not here, our peak's disciples are not ones to be so easily bullied. Even if I can't shield you, Dashixiong[5] is around. He will certainly seek justice for you!"

The young man's thin, pallid lips parted slightly, as if some great emotion was about to spill forth.

To her surprise, he only said, "All of this was my own doing. There is no one else to blame."

He turned around and returned to the depths of the dark cell. The clanging of metal against metal was the only thing to pierce the oppressive silence.

“Please leave, Ershijie.”

“Shidi!” Liu Qishuang cried out in protest.

However, the halberd-wielding guard holding the lantern had returned. He gestured at her to proceed, urging her along. Time was up. Cangya’s dungeon had rules that not even she could violate, despite her status and cultivation.

Liu Qishuang took one last long look at the prisoner, who stood upright despite his reedlike frame, as if no darkness could break him.

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MISTER VILLAIN watched the figures slowly disappear at the end of the tunnel and exhaled with relief. No. He should think of himself as Yin Biyue now—the fourth disciple of the Cangya Mountains’ Xihua Peak, Yin Biyue.

After waking in this gloomy place, before he could begin to orient himself, a cacophony of ringing notifications had echoed in his head. They were so noisy that he wanted to defenestrate his own brain.

‹Thank you for choosing Rebirth Company. This is a certified product. We support product inspection, though no refunds…›

‹Verification complete. Conditions met. The Halo can now be activated.›

‹Do you wish to proceed with downloading the official Halo Pack?›

‹Halo Pack downloading… Please wait.›

Fortunately, the moment he noticed his visitor, the original body's memory immediately provided useful information: *Ershijie.*

He was extremely pleased with the fragments of memory that flashed through his mind. This was it! The standard ultimate villain setup! Look at his personality: dark, brooding, and narrow-minded. Look at his body: perfect for demonic cultivation. He'd finally joined the big leagues! He wouldn't be a small-fry extra in the script's transition scenes with no more than three-and-a-half lines anymore. To lock him up in a place like this *must* mean he was an infamous big boss!

Upon meeting Liu Qishuang, the something pack (whatever it was) had started downloading. He tried to speak as little as possible to avoid tipping her off to anything odd. Now that she was gone, he could collect himself and organize his thoughts.

This was a fantasy world. The world's powers were roughly divided into these: the One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects, the Twin Buddhist Temples, and the Demonic Twelve Palaces. The "One Mountain" was where he stood right now—the Cangya Mountains. And this dungeon was run by the undisputed strongest sect in the realm.

The OG Yin Biyue had been locked up here for "injury to fellow disciples" and "harboring evil intentions." His public trial was only a few days away. Despite having his vital qi sealed, he'd forcibly broken the seal and distorted nature itself. He should've successfully entered SEED mode[6] and broken out of prison from there, but he'd been entangled in a dimensional fluctuation instead. He had transmigrated someplace else, just as Mister Villain had transmigrated here.

When Liu Qishuang asked if he had plotted to kill Luo Mingchuan and thirty-two other disciples, the corresponding memory of the incident had flooded back into his brain and caught him off guard. He didn't know if his face had shown any unnatural reaction, but he understood his situation now. He was following a well-known trope: The genius villain shoots himself in the foot.

Hate had sprouted in the talented Yin Biyue's heart after he'd been knocked from the top by the protagonist, which prompted the antagonist to attempt murder on the protagonist and his entourage. Unfortunately for Yin Biyue, the protagonist had plot armor and led everyone out of danger. Rather than killing the man he hated, Yin Biyue ended up getting himself in trouble. With such a cliché plot, one glance was enough for him to guess how the story would unfold.

Yin Biyue recalled the man in white he saw on the screen prior to his transmigration. *Mm-hmm.* Without a doubt, that was the protagonist.

Now was the time for Yin Biyue to do something great!

Wait. He didn't know the spell the OG had used to escape. Which meant *that* guy could've left without issue, but the present him could not. All he could do was sit around and wait to get owned.

‹Ding! Download complete. Congratulations, dear customer! Please enjoy your journey through space and time!›

What good is the halo in a situation like this? (ノ°□°)ノ ⌒┻┻

Yin Biyue swallowed down the surge of anger so fierce he nearly popped a blood vessel. For the serious crime he was charged with, a sentence like expulsion from the sect would be fine by him; he could just turn to demonic cultivation. However, having his cultivation stripped was

equally likely. Cultivation stripped = reduced to a mortal = breaking away from the plot = the end of his road to villainy! How could he avoid that fate?

As for whether there'd be opportunities for breakthroughs later where he could stand back on his feet, have fortuitous encounters, and earn a second chance at cultivation… No chance! He wasn't the protagonist. He'd rather bet on a dead horse!

According to the OG's memories, there were only five members in this peak. That wasn't even enough players for a round of *Game of Heroes: Three Kingdoms*. Aside from his traveling third shixiong, everyone else had paid him a visit already—and he'd promptly chased them away with his nonviolent but uncooperative attitude. Liu Qishuang had been the last one to see him.

Give me another chance, babe! I'll definitely turn myself around for you! (Hand_reaching_out_pleadingly.jpg)

Yin Biyue thoroughly combed through his memories. Who else would come to visit him? Honestly, considering his popularity, it was already good no one had come to *kill* him. Heh. Was he going to hang his hopes on the brainless, saintly protagonist with a bleeding heart to visit *him*, the chief culprit? Why, to listen to him make up stories in his own defense?!

With the Fiend Halo on him, there was even less chance of exoneration. It was for the best it wasn't activated. As soon as it was, he'd instantly draw the aggro of every living thing in range.

He poked at his new memories again. They were mostly fragments, and for some reason, the "injury to fellow disciples" segment was the haziest. That meant that he couldn't just say whatever he wanted during the

trial. On top of that, he would also have to maintain his somber image to avoid giving himself away. What a lousy hand. Forget poker, he couldn't even win a game of old maid like this!

Regardless, he mustn't lose his composure. Yin Biyue quickly calmed himself down. There had to be something he'd overlooked; there had to be a way to turn this around in his favor… The bleeding heart protagonist, Luo Mingchuan, really seemed like his only chance.

Crouching in the corner of his cell, Yin Biyue racked his brains for possible solutions.

***

MEANWHILE, AN ANGRY roar shook the 24th floor of the Rebirth Company.

"Show yourself, Liu Xiaodai! Where *the hell* is the White Halo I just finished calibrating?!"

Chapter 3

IT WAS THE START of spring. The previous night, it had rained over the Cangya range, and fog still shrouded the hills that morning. As though cleansed, the greenery of the landscape was painted in lush hues. With faint mist draping him and dew dampening the hems of his robes, a man passed through the jagged hills via a stone path. His eyes were calm. He walked with a confident, easy gait, yet there was no trace of arrogance in him. By contrast, the girl in pink chasing after him appeared frantic.

He Yanyun gazed at the back of the man in front of her. Luo-shixiong had just been conferred the honor of chief disciple of Cangya. For the occasion, he had donned sophisticated, stately ceremonial robes, which were a change from his usual simple attire. A green satin jacket covered his fine snow-white brocade robe that was embroidered with the open seas and ancient pines. On the lapels and hems of the sleeves were clouds neatly stitched in silver thread. A coiled dragon knot ornamented with nephrite was tied around his waist. As he moved, the layers of his expansive sleeves flowed like rolling clouds. The attire accentuated his tall, upright figure.

Seeing the distance between them widen and anxious that she was about to be left behind, He Yanyun drew in a deep breath and vaulted. Her figure blurred for a moment before she landed in front of the man. “Shixiong!”

He wasn’t startled by her sudden action. “Shimei,[7] if you have business with me, please wait until I return,” he said calmly.

His handsome features were sharp, but thanks to his kind demeanor, he radiated a sense of friendliness and reliability. Some people were endowed with the special ability to sound gentle, raising no anger even when they spoke words of refusal. Luo Mingchuan was such a man.

Sure of his good temper, He Yanyun continued to block his way, her mouth turned down into a charming pout. “Shixiong, I heard you got the Cangya Token from Shifu. What are you going to do with it?”

Her delicate beauty made her seem more like a little cutie than a rude brat. Nonetheless, he remain unmoved.

“Please return, Shimei. I am going down the mountain.”

“Why do you need the Cangya Token to go down the mountain?” She wrinkled her fine eyebrows and pondered for a moment before a thought struck her. Her sweet almond eyes widened in shock. “Are you going to the Cangya Dungeon? You’re not thinking of visiting that guy, are you, Shixiong?”

He remained silent. She knew he never lied, so this reaction was as good as an admission. It only annoyed her even more.

“Why would you do that? What’s so great about Xihua Peak? That guy was clearly plotting to harm us. Shixiong, you’re now the chief disciple of Cangya. You don’t need to worry about him!”

Luo Mingchuan’s forehead creased. “Please watch what you say, He-shimei.”

But she couldn’t help herself. “Am I wrong? He’ll be stripped of his cultivation and expelled from the mountain at the trial seven days from now. The way I see it, Xihua Peak can’t shield him from a serious crime like injuring other disciples! Not even the Sword—”

Abruptly, she choked, as if throttled by an invisible hand. An enormous terror surged up her chest, and cold sweat trickled down her neck. This intimidation did not originate from any one person, but rather from a deep-rooted fear within her soul. She was not alone; almost everyone in the world knew this fear. Even if the sacred name was uttered in passing, any slight disrespect would trigger a rush of the fear carved into one's bones, so oppressive it felt suffocating. Only now did she realize Luo-shixiong's caution to her wasn't to stop her from insulting Yin Biyue. He was worried she'd misspeak against that venerable person.

He Yanyun had indeed forgotten her place. The Sword Sage Wei Jingfeng—Yin Biyue's master and Xihua Peak's lord, who had been traveling the world for years—was not someone she could speak of so frivolously.

She inhaled and regained her composure. Her tone softened to an anxious plea. "Shixiong, must you go? Won't you take me along? I also want to see what the dungeon looks like…"

Unwavering, Luo Mingchuan shook his head. "Please cease this behavior."

She wanted to protest, but before she could say anything, Luo Mingchuan began to ripple like water, until he vanished in the blink of an eye. She was shocked at first but quickly realized what happened. Luo-shixiong might not have been capable of spatial magic, but with the Cangya Token in his hand, he could borrow the power of the Cangya Mountains and move between the mountains' arrays in an instant.

She stomped the ground hard, frustrated.

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As the heavy black iron doors of the Cangya Dungeon swung open, the darkness behind them spread like an abyss and revealed its true nature. It was no mere dungeon, but more like a beast's maw waiting for prey.

Luo Mingchuan had only taken the first step into the dungeon when his breath caught. He was a spiritual cultivator, and the feeling of restriction on his vital qi's circulation was miserable. At first, the discomfort was minor. As he descended further, the pressure mounted. By the time he reached the bottom, it felt as if he'd been fettered by invisible shackles.

Having received outside communication, a guard was already waiting for him at the inside entrance with a flickering lamp in hand.

Luo Mingchuan gave a slight bow. "Thank you for the trouble."

The guard sidestepped to avoid the bow. "Not at all," he said, his voice rough with disuse.

Luo Mingchuan knew the reason he had come here: He was the one Yin Biyue had wanted to kill back at the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament; the others were just collateral. What he didn't understand was *why.* He and Yin Biyue had known each other since their mortal days at Lanyuan Academy. Although they hadn't crossed paths after entering the Cangya Sect, there had never been any bad blood he could think of between them.

He gazed at the dark and frigid dungeon sorrowfully. To think the talented youth he knew had fallen to such a state.

***

THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS echoed down the narrow corridor, steady and powerful, reverberating throughout the dungeon. Yin Biyue, leaning against the wall, opened his eyes. He couldn't make out who had come, as his vision had weakened significantly after his vital qi was sealed away. It wasn't until the figure was but five steps away that the flickering lamplight illuminated the newcomer's face before him.

White robes with a jade crown, strong brows and refined eyes… It was Luo Mingchuan!

Yin Biyue's pupils contracted, and every muscle in his body tensed. He nearly leaped to his feet but willed himself to relax. His instinctive reaction had been from the OG's intense feelings toward the man that lingered even after the soul had fled. How deep a grudge did he have?!

The guard handed the lamp over to Luo Mingchuan and left.

Peering into the cell, Luo Mingchuan tentatively called out to the darkness. "Yin-shidi?"

From the shadows emerged the rustling sound of fabric and the grating clanking of iron chains. The prisoner stepped forward until he came under the candlelight. His face was pale, his eyes downcast. He was dressed in simple robes that lacked any ornamentation. His long hair was unfastened and draped freely down his back. The light of the flickering candle reflecting on his expansive white sleeves only further accentuated his emaciated figure. When he looked up and met Luo Mingchuan's gaze squarely, his eyes were as distant and profound as winter starlight.

Luo Mingchuan paused, taken aback.

His ever-sharp intuition told him there was something amiss—the Yin Biyue he remembered wasn't like this. His eyes had always been grim, and on the rare occasions their gazes had met, it felt like the chilling focus of a predator sighting its prey. The coldness emanating from the one in front of him, however, felt more like the innate detachment of a god observing the lower realms from lofty clouds. It bewildered him.

Luo Mingchuan studied Yin Biyue carefully.

Since Luo Mingchuan had first laid eyes on Yin Biyue at the mortal school they'd attended, the former had known the latter was good-looking. Now, Luo Mingchuan noticed with a start that, although Yin Biyue had not yet matured, his features were fully developed. There was not a flaw to be found in his complexion, from his thin lips to his tall nose, his swordlike brows, and his starlit eyes. He was like the sculpture of a shrine idol that had been carved from white jade with exquisite care. He stood aloof with divine grace, utterly devoid of life.

Chapter 4

As Luo Mingchuan watched Yin Biyue, the boy's thin lips parted ever so slightly.

"Luo-shixiong."

The sound of Yin Biyue's voice, both distant and empty of feeling, snapped Luo Mingchuan back to the present. That was how Yin Biyue had addressed him back at the academy. It had been many years since he last heard Yin Biyue call him that. It was almost as if many things had changed between them after they entered Cangya. The acquaintance they once shared had eroded; they were now no more than strangers.

His thoughts drifted far away once again for a fleeting moment. When his gaze fell upon Yin Biyue once more, all the questions he had prepared caught in his throat.

His voice grew soft. "Yin-shidi…"

Without waiting to hear more, Yin Biyue spoke up. "Have you come to question me about what transpired at the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament?"

Luo Mingchuan swallowed the words he *wanted* to say and nodded. "Yes."

He didn't know what was wrong with him. The truth of the matter was beyond doubt. Why was he secretly harboring hope? Why was he refusing to believe the boy wanted to hurt him? He even dared to wish Yin Biyue was innocent. He must have gone mad.

Luo Mingchuan collected himself and raised his guard anew.

However, Yin Biyue said nothing more. He only stared at Luo Mingchuan, and his gaze reflected neither joy nor sorrow. He offered no reasons and no excuses—nothing to defend himself. There was only the palpable silence in the dungeon.

Meanwhile, Yin Biyue was so panicked inside he wanted to bash his head against the wall. What should he say?!

He had rehearsed the script: The protagonist showed up and lambasted him with accusations, sternly questioning his motives. Yin Biyue would play along and appear to endure the humiliation for a greater cause. He would refuse to defend himself at first. After being pushed into a corner, he would reveal that he'd been coerced by demonic cultivators in the secret realm and had no choice but to set up a spiritual array to injure his fellow disciples. He would explain that he'd only pretended to comply, and that he'd planned to take down the demons in a blaze of mutual destruction and sacrifice himself at the final moment.

See what an exceptional script that is? Dramatic conflict, character arcs—it has everything!

Although there were thousands of plot holes, with his years of superb acting combined with the protagonist's soft heart, he was 70 percent sure he could bluff his way through. Then, when the public trial came around, the protagonist's testimony and plea for mercy would be a perfect turning point. But what *now*?

Protagonist, you're not reading your lines!

Before Yin Biyue had sorted his thoughts, he saw the other man wrinkle his eyebrows as if displeased with his silence… Screw it! He'd just play it by ear! Do or die! Just as Yin Biyue raised his gaze to speak, he met

a pair of abyssal eyes. They were black as a well of ink and resembled an infinite maelstrom that could suck in the human soul. Yin Biyue was taken aback.

The “Ghara Pupil Technique”?!

Luo Mingchuan knew *the* Ghara Pupil Technique!

What the heck. What happened to your bleeding heart, Protagonist? Why are you opening with a powerful attack?!

After so many rounds of transmigration, Yin Biyue was experienced in this type of heart-stealing magic. It was similar to the demonic sect’s bewitchment and could even manipulate another’s mind when cultivated to the extreme. However, the pupil technique Luo Mingchuan was using was an orthodox method that did not cause any harm to the mind. It demanded extraordinary talent to cultivate, and at Luo Mingchuan’s current level, he could only disorient the target and compel them to spill the truth. Nonetheless, it was potent enough that Yin Biyue’s cultivation could not block it. Not even Liu Qishuang could defend against it if she were caught off guard.

Yin Biyue marveled at how overpowered the protagonist was. That he could pick up such a difficult technique was ludicrous. At the same time, Yin Biyue wanted to slap his own thighs and laugh uncontrollably, because after so many years of transmigration, he had nothing if not the ability to harden his soul against such attacks. It was akin to the unyielding strength of twenty-four karat gold-titanium alloy, never before defeated!

You want some of this?! Come at me, bro!

But, alas, this charade must go on.

Luo Mingchuan saw that Yin Biyue was briefly stunned by the technique, but soon his distant eyes clouded over with a veil of mist carried on a mountain breeze. His gaze, now blank with childlike innocence, dampened Luo Mingchuan's next words. An inexplicable sense of guilt washed over him.

"Shidi, why did you try to kill me?" Luo Mingchuan asked.

Yin Biyue wanted to slap him across the face. *Young man! How could you be so clueless about a villain's heart?!*

Having his exceptional talent constantly overshadowed until it finally drove him to evil was the basic setup of a villain! The OG had been the top student of the academy, but after Luo Mingchuan entered the sect, he'd outshined Yin Biyue time and again. Twenty times a day, the OG encountered gossips whispering among themselves. It had started with "Luo-shixiong isn't as gifted as Yin-shixiong, but he's really nice!" and had ended with "What's the point of that Yin guy entering Xihua Peak? Luo-shixiong is a hundred times better than he'll ever be!"

At first, Yin Biyue had merely been proud and aloof with little regard for socializing with the others. However, in his two years alongside Luo Mingchuan, his personality had twisted. In the end, he made a mad dash toward darkness and vengeance!

Yin Biyue broke into a faint smile. It rippled and undulated in his eyes like a pond disturbed by a pebble, then his eyes seemed to melt into a vernal breeze that danced through an entire mountain of peach blossoms. It was intoxicating, as though a celestial being who'd once belonged to the heavens had returned to the mortal world because of this single curl of the lips.

“Shixiong, have you come to see me? How nice.” Yin Biyue tilted his head in wonder with a hint of a child’s naivete. “I’m so glad I could see you again.”

Luo Mingchuan was stunned. Why would his shidi say that? This Yin Biyue was truly a stranger to him. It was as if he’d stripped himself of his defenses and melted the ice that kept others at arm’s length. He was real… and vulnerable.

Yes, *vulnerable*. Luo Mingchuan couldn’t understand how such a proud, cold person could become vulnerable, or why his heart ached at the realization.

Yin Biyue was immersed in his acting until he saw emotion flicker in his shixiong’s eyes. He snapped out of it with a shudder. He might have gone overboard. Had he roused Luo Mingchuan’s suspicions?

Wait, of course! The question was “Why did you try to kill me?” Someone under the spell of the pupil technique would never have answered anything irrelevant. He’d been too arrogant, too careless! If Luo Mingchuan detected the anomaly in his soul…

He had to say something to distract Luo Mingchuan from his mistake ASAP! But how? Yin Biyue continued to maintain a dazed look on his face, but his brain was working at full speed. With this long of a pause, even a bleeding heart would know something was up!

‹Ding! To help customers better understand the usage of this product, we are offering three complimentary test runs to assist you in resolving life’s challenges. Do you wish to use one now?›

What do you mean, *a test run?*

Luo Mingchuan’s eyebrows drew together…

Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Resolve my life's challenge right now!

‹Ding! Halo Helper at your service!›

Yin Biyue felt himself stiffen. As if an invisible rope had appeared in his body, his muscles were guided into forming a different expression. He withdrew his smile.

"You thought I wanted to kill you?" he murmured, like he was both asking himself and answering the other's question. His voice trailed into an imperceptible quiver at the end from the feigned effort of suppressing his surging emotions. "Kill you? Why would I do that? Luo-shixiong, didn't you know…?" A radiant light shone from his cool eyes, brightened by a blazing fury. He stared at the man before him. "Even if I died, I would never allow anything to happen to you!"

Luo Mingchuan was deeply shaken. Yin Biyue's eyes flashed with madness, obsession, bitterness, resentment, and an emotion Luo Mingchuan couldn't name. This profound mixture gathered in Yin Biyue's beautiful, faintly red-rimmed eyes.

"Shidi, you…" Luo Mingchuan trailed off.

"I only wanted to leave Cangya together with you. I never meant to make a killing array. How did the transportation array turn into the 'Crimson Omen'? Why weren't its effect limited to you? I couldn't control it. Even though I followed exactly what that person told me to do, I…"

Yin Biyue lunged forward and grabbed the cage, his iron shackles clanging as his pale fingers gripped the black iron bars.

Leave Cangya…together? Luo Mingchuan couldn't take his eyes off the heavy chains that bound those fragile wrists.

"Who told you to do that? Where were you bringing me?"

“Inside the secret realm, I encountered a cultivator from the Lake of Pure Water. He told me he knew how to grant my wish.” The boy grew emotional, and his voice raised as his thin shoulders trembled. “Where was I taking you?! You made me a promise, Shixiong! The academy’s teacher said ‘A gentleman’s promise cannot be retracted!’ Have you really forgotten everything?!”

The Lake of Pure Water? Understanding dawned on Luo Mingchuan. *Yes, the Lake of Pure Water! Shidi had to have encountered a demonic cultivator there and fallen for his designs!*

Before Luo Mingchuan could pursue the thought further and question Yin Biyue, he rambled on by himself.

“It was to Qiong Prefecture! I knew you wouldn’t want to go with me, so I came up with a plan.”

The smile returned to Yin Biyue’s face as his eyes shone once more, as if telling Luo Mingchuan, *Aren’t I clever? Compliment me!* However, the blossoming smile wilted back into sorrow. “But Shixiong, why did you change?”

Luo Mingchuan’s eyes widened in disbelief. “How could you…?”

How had Yin Biyue known about Qiong Prefecture?!

Luo Mingchuan jolted back. He had to be careful; violent fluctuation of emotion under the pupil technique’s influence could easily damage the mind. Instinct told him that the questions had to stop here. Yin Biyue seemed about to reveal some unknown secret.

“Spirit return—*break*!” Luo Mingchuan hissed.

Unfortunately, his current cultivation did not include the ability to cast spells as fast as he could speak. It was too late.

“That mid-autumn night, three years ago, at the graduation celebration at Lanyuan Academy,” Yin Biyue said slowly. “We enjoyed pear-blossom brew all night long, under the bright, full moon. At the time, what you said to me…”

Luo Mingchuan’s mind was blown. His distant memory of that night of drunken absurdity had long since blurred. Dear heaven above, what had he done?!

The world-renowned Lanyuan Academy admitted no more than thirty students a year, and those who successfully completed their studies were few and far between. There was no set length of study; one could graduate as long as the final examination was eventually passed. Those who couldn’t bear to continue studying could leave as they wished. However, once they left, they could never enter the academy again, nor could they call themselves a true student of the academy. Nonetheless, even bearing the title of a lapsed academy student allowed one an illustrious future. And those who managed to graduate were extraordinary. Whether they pursued power, influence, or the path of enlightenment, all who emerged from that institution could be considered heroes.

Luo Mingchuan was older than Yin Biyue by four years, but they had entered the school in the same year. After three years as classmates, they passed the final exam together.

During their time at the academy, Yin Biyue claimed the top score every year and became the school’s youngest champion in history. Every

major clan and sect, every faction of influence—even the monarchs—had vied for his favor, making him a figure of great renown.

The night of their graduation, some twenty of the graduates had gathered at the Water Lotus Pavilion and celebrated with wine and songs. These exceptionally gifted young men possessed the audacity to look down upon the world and the ambition to venture far and wide. At the same time, they had no idea what the future held. After their farewells, they might never cross paths again, and even if they did, it might be as enemies. They would embark on their own journeys, whether those took them to a future of vivid blooms, blazing flames, wealth in abundance, or the solitude of harsh cultivation atop a lonely peak shrouded in a sea of clouds.

The path ahead was a mystery; the future was unpredictable. All they knew was, after that night, their lives would change. The torrent of emotions that filled their hearts manifested as the wine in their cups.

That year, Yin Biyue had been but a proud youth.

That year, Luo Mingchuan had been but a teenager who still got roaring drunk.

Gradually, the dust cleared from Luo Mingchuan's mind, and the memory regained its vivid appearance. Upon the Water Lotus Pavilion strewn with cups and plates, the graduates had drunkenly sung to the beats of chopsticks tapped on their bowls. They toasted each other merrily until dawn against the backdrop of fireworks.

More scenes of the past flashed in his mind.

"I don't want to go to those Cangya Mountains. What's so good about cultivation? I should just go back home to Qiong Prefecture and

marry, have some kids… Heh heh. Why don't you come with me? Let's go home together…"

Luo Mingchuan froze on the spot, his mouth agape and his eyes wide. He had long since forgotten whose sleeve he had tugged when he gave that speech. Had it not been the shimei who had slapped him across the face the next day? Had it actually been…Yin Biyue?!

What had occurred after that? Had he said anything else or done anything outrageous? Had something *happened*?

How old had Yin Biyue been then? No older than fourteen, surely. He desperately wished he could fly back to that night, grab his drunken self by the collar, and slap him sober.

You beast!

Before he could say anything further, the mist clouding Yin Biyue's eyes dissipated. When the thick canopy of lashes lifted again, the eyes that stared back at Luo Mingchuan were once again as cold as the stars above. Yin Biyue's forehead creased and a trace of confusion flickered in his eyes, as if he didn't understand what had just transpired.

The pupil technique was finally undone. For a moment, they both said nothing. Then Yin Biyue backed two steps away and turned to retreat back into the darkness.

"If Luo-shixiong has no further business here, please leave." His emotionless voice echoed softly.

Luo Mingchuan fled from the scene.

Chapter 5

"CAN WE REALLY NOT get in touch with Mister Villain?" Liu Xiaodai asked, hunched over the table. He sounded dispirited. "If anything goes sideways with that halo, I'll have to walk."

Wang Wei crawled out of the half-assembled transmigration machine and wiped his face clean. "I haven't detected any fluctuations at all. What's the wrong halo used for again? Auto-exoneration? That's not so bad."

"But it was still being calibrated. We don't know what side effects it might have!"

"Ha ha, what side effects does a White Halo even have? Turning someone albino?" When Liu Xiaodai shot him a death glare, Wang Wei shut up and ducked his head. "Wh-what, is that actually possible?"

***

‹THE TEST RUN of Halo Helper is over. Dear customer, you have two test runs remaining.›

Luo Mingchuan was long gone by the time the digital notification pinged Yin Biyue back to reality. During his interaction with Luo Mingchuan, the holes in his memory about the academy had mostly been patched. It appeared he had to come in contact with relevant persons to activate related memories. He'd been so busy watching the deluge of memories that he hadn't focused on what expressions he'd made or words he'd said while under the halo's control.

Despite the memory patch, Yin Biyue was still confused about the situation. In his memories, he'd attended the graduation celebration at the academy but had retired early after a few drinks. Judging by the way Luo Mingchuan had looked conflicted, pained, and remorseful—could he have owed money to the OG Yin Biyue? No, that was too basic. Could he have slept with a chick the OG had a crush on? Pfft, nah. Cangya's teachings emphasized the restraint of desires. If he had ejaculated his vital essence so early, it would've been impossible for him to enter the sect.

Could it be that "Qiong Prefecture" was some kind of leverage against the protagonist? Had he run away out of guilt because it'd been exposed? Trying to figure it out made Yin Biyue's head spin.

Nevertheless, this counted as fooling the protagonist, right? He would trust the Halo Helper this once. He sat down in the corner of the cell and settled into a comfortable position to continue organizing the scattered memories in his brain.

***

THE ATMOSPHERE of the dungeon was pure darkness—and it significantly improved Yin Biyue's sleep quality! Seven days passed in a flash.

The day he was taken out of his cell was clear and fresh, with a gentle breeze that soothed the soul. Before he stepped out of the dungeon, the guard handed him a massive black cloak. It was thanks to the hood veiling his eyes that he wasn't blinded by the brightness of day.

He savored the fresh air and gazed upon the expanse of lush green mountain ranges that stretched as far as he could see. Four disciplinary disciples dressed in Cangya's sect uniforms came to take custody of Yin Biyue from the dungeon guard. With two leading the way and two bringing up the rear, they escorted him up the mountain toward the main peak's Qinghe Hall for the public trial.

Yin Biyue hadn't been well-liked in the past because he was proud and cheerless. Now, after hurting his fellow disciples, he was downright reviled for his ruthlessness. Every one of the disciples in the escort regarded him with contempt. One even scoffed at him. Yin Biyue was secretly in awe. A major sect really was on another level. What impeccable comportment that none of them cursed at him aloud!

He hadn't moved much since his imprisonment, and his cultivation had been sealed. Perhaps the oppressive power of Cangya Dungeon also played a part. Whatever the case, after a couple of steps, he felt exhausted; his legs were weak and his back ached. As he trudged up the stairs, someone shoved him from behind.

"Hurry up!" yelled a disciplinary disciple.

An angry rebuke rumbled in like thunder. "Enough!"

Yin Biyue's mind was occupied by the public trial, and he was still wrapped up in his thoughts when the interruption occurred. "It's not their fault," he blurted on instinct. "I was too slow."

But as soon as he spoke, he tensed up. That voice belonged to Luo Mingchuan!

In the distance stood a tiny white shape. The light and agile figure pushed off an ancient forest tree. In only a few leaps, Luo Mingchuan

landed in front of the escort.

Yin Biyue marveled. That handsome protagonist face looked even better in daylight.

Tsk, tsk, tsk, Yin Biyue thought.

Luo Mingchuan said nothing, but he fixed his eyes on Yin Biyue as though his throat was caught on a thousand words he couldn't voice. He didn't even register when the disciplinary disciples cupped their hands, bowed at him, and greeted him with "Luo-shishu."[8]

Yin Biyue was baffled. *Protagonist, are you nearsighted? What are you staring at me for?*

***

SINCE THEIR FATEFUL MEETING in the dungeon, Luo Mingchuan hadn't slept a full night. Whenever he closed his eyes, images of the boy in the darkness filled his mind. In them, Yin Biyue wore a faint, innocent smile; or he was obsessed and mad; or he was as cold and distant as the stars.

Luo Mingchuan tried to meditate in search of tranquility, but instead of peace, bits and pieces of their shared three years at the academy flashed through his thoughts, scene after scene. His mind finally settled on the night when moonlight shimmered upon the Water Lotus Pavilion—when he had knocked over his wine cup and stained a part of his moon-white sleeves. Yin Biyue had taken Luo Mingchuan's drunken words that night to heart and clung to them until he'd reached this point.

And wasn’t it true, though his shidi was a prodigy, that he’d been young at the time? He was unversed in the ways of the world, pure and naive. Luo Mingchuan had made a promise and broken his word. Yin Biyue’s pride prevented him from demanding an explanation for the forgotten promise, so he bottled up his feelings instead. Eventually, the grievance altered his temper, giving rise to obsession, and they ended up here.

All that had transpired over the years was now explained. Luo Mingchuan had been the one who ruined Yin Biyue.

Before coming here, he’d had a plan. At the end of the day, he was the cause of the incident in the secret realm and was willing to take the blame. While he couldn’t reciprocate Yin Biyue’s obsessive affection, he could guide him out of confusion and help him leave his infatuation and anger behind.

But when Luo Mingchuan saw the frail young man stumble from a push, only to straighten up and stand tall, his heart leaped with concern. He sternly reprimanded the escort in a harsh tone he’d never taken before.

In only seven days, Yin Biyue had grown so thin it seemed as if a slight breeze could blow him away. His cool eyes were hidden under the shadow of the large hood over his head. Only his gaunt cheeks and pale lips were visible. If he’d suffered injuries in the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament, being shackled and having his cultivation sealed must have felt all the worse.

The four disciplinary disciples of Yin Biyue’s escort bowed. Because Luo Mingchuan hadn’t given leave, they didn’t dare rise. Luo-shishu had

always been gentle and kind; none of them could think of another time when he had ever raised his voice so harshly.

To their surprise, a cool voice offered a calm explanation. “It’s not their fault. I was too slow.”

He was speaking up for them? Why…was he so different from the rumors?

Conflicting emotions filled Luo Mingchuan, and he paused for a long time.

“Are you all right?” he finally asked in a pained voice. Then he remembered there were others around; he cleared his throat. “At ease.”

The four disciples hurried to step back. Yin Biyue remained silent through it all.

Luo Mingchuan’s heart clenched with worry. Did his shidi misunderstand and think he had come to mock him? He rushed a few steps forward, frantic to explain himself. “Don’t worry, I have a way to fix this!”

Yin Biyue thought Luo Mingchuan’s reaction was a bit odd. Wasn’t he a little *too* eager to help? But Yin Biyue promptly dismissed the thought. All hail the bleeding heart!

I’m counting on you, Protagonist. Expulsion from the sect is fine, as long as I get to keep my cultivation!

A gust of easterly wind swept past them just then, rustling through the expansive mountain forest. It ruffled Luo Mingchuan’s flowing robes and lifted Yin Biyue’s black hood.

Luo Mingchuan cried out in shock. “Shidi, your hair!”

As Yin Biyue was facing the wind, his long silver hair cascaded down his shoulders. It shimmered like snow in the morning sun and danced freely in the air.

Yin Biyue glanced back, and dread filled him when he saw his white strands. The dungeon was a dark place, and he hadn’t paid attention to his appearance. He had no idea when this happened. Was it a side effect of the OG’s forceful attempt at breaking the seal on his cultivation? Or was it an anomaly caused by the incompatibility of his soul with the body when he transmigrated? How to explain this rare sign of qi deviation?

Fortunately, Luo Mingchuan wasn’t using the pupil technique to compel an explanation, so Yin Biyue only needed to stay in character. He shot Luo Mingchuan an impassive look. “It’s fine,” he said coldly. Meaning: none of your business.

Luo Mingchuan felt Yin Biyue's cold demeanor like a fine needle that pierced the softest part of his heart. Even breathing ached. He would prefer his shidi to hate him and yell at him, vibrant with emotions as he had been in the dungeon. Luo Mingchuan didn't want to endure this indifference. He didn't want Yin Biyue to treat him like an insignificant stranger.

The four disciplinary disciples were also startled. How did Yin Biyue's black hair turn white? Could he have qi deviated? Then they saw Luo Mingchuan's reaction. What was going on? Why was he *also* different from the rumors? Was there some secret between them?!

Even the most proper sect enjoyed gossip. The disciplinary disciples bowed their heads in an evasive manner, but their eyes sparkled with curiosity and their ears perked up. These were front row seats! Live coverage of the untold tales between the chief disciple of Cangya Sect and the prodigy of Xihua Peak! Alas, the two main actors of the show were destined to disappoint them.

Yin Biyue glanced at one of the disciplinary disciples and spoke once more in his cool voice. "Let us continue, lest we be late."

‹Ding! The villain expression 'sharp glare' appeared! Conditions met. The halo is now activated!›

Yin Biyue freaked out. *What villain expression? That was just a casual glance! How was that a "sharp glare"? How?!*

Now he was going to draw aggro from some rando. Thanks for nothing, halo!

Cheng Xi, the recipient of Yin Biyue's glance, felt as if he'd locked eyes with twin pools of clear, pure spring water. His heart clenched

involuntarily.

Cheng Xi was a disciple of the Disciplinary Hall who'd been given the task of escorting Yin Biyue and had long since heard of his reputation. The top student of a mortal academy and the once-in-a-lifetime prodigy of Xihua Peak was far beyond the reach of a little disciple of the Disciplinary Hall like Cheng Xi. But no matter who they were, any souls who injured their fellow disciples were beyond forgiveness.

So Cheng Xi had thought, but Yin Biyue wasn't nearly as dark and gloomy as the rumors claimed. Standing there, the thin young man resembled the evergreen pines atop Tianxin Cliff or the eternal snow of Chenyun Ridge—icy and lofty, untouchable.

He wanted to murder Luo Mingchuan out of jealousy? Thoughts of him were nowhere to be found in those eyes! Luo Mingchuan's reaction had also been extremely odd.

While Cheng Xi was immersed in his thoughts, Yin Biyue shot a look at him and urged the disciplinary disciples on politely.

Yin Biyue was thinking of *them*? Was he worried that they would be punished if they were delayed? Could someone like this really injure a fellow disciple? For the first time, uncertainty surged in Cheng Xi's mind.

He cleared his throat to cover his confusion and bowed to Luo Mingchuan. "The public trial will be held in two hours. Please do not make things difficult for us, Luo-shishu."

The other three disciples bowed as well.

Yin Biyue had already turned around and continued the ascent, so the four disciples hurried after him. Luo Mingchuan wanted to say something more, but he was left only with the sight of a noble figure ascending the

steps. A shimmering cascade of white hair spilled across those deep-black robes like fresh snow swirling down the high mountains.

Luo Mingchuan felt lost in a daze.

Yin Biyue’s pace was steady as he climbed the stone stairs and disappeared, step by step, into the emerald horizon. None could trap him—neither the distant blue skies nor the ranges of a thousand peaks.

Chapter 6

WHAT DEFINED the world? Was it the most primitivepowers, like the first light of fire in the sprawling wilderness? Was it the domineering nature of hegemonic kings made triumphant through the thunderous hooves of the cavalry riding to the battlefields of the northern frontier? Or was it the civilization sculpted by time as the raging rivers nurtured the settlements along their banks?

When the way of the universe prevailed, the world belonged to all.

To the multitudinous cultivators, anyone who could reach the summit of the Cangya range and gaze down at the sweep of ten thousand miles truly stood above the world.

This immense realm was divided into five continents: east, west, south, north, and central. A myriad of sects inundated the earth, all with different teachings. But since one man had become a Sage two centuries ago, only the Cangya Mountains of the Western Continent could claim the uncontested title of the number one sect in the world. This was the reason they were the “One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects,” not the “Four Daoist Sects.”

Everyone was well aware that as long as the Sword Sage lived, the current world order would remain as unchangeable as bedrock. He alone could influence the powers that be.

The Cangya Mountains were a nigh-endless range that stretched for a hundred miles and more. Mist and clouds blanketed its peaks where kite hawks swooped and cranes cried. There were six main peaks in the Cangya

range, each with their own unique dragon vein and terrains, varying from the perilous and majestic, to the magnificent and beautiful, to the tranquil and remote. Xiqian Peak was the domain of spiritual cultivation, while martial cultivators made Xihua Peak their home.

Today, a major event was to take place among those mountains.

Qinghe Hall of Xiqian Peak was packed from its gates to its square, a change from its usual emptiness. The crowd rubbed shoulder to shoulder and craned their necks for a better look into the hall. Many disciples had crawled out of bed before the sun was up just to secure front-row seats. Dressed in their Cangya uniforms, they whispered among themselves, but they kept their voices low, mindful not to cause a disturbance.

In contrast, there were only a handful of people inside the main hall.

The spacious Qinghe Hall was so large there seemed no end to its boundaries. Massive gray jade floor tiles shimmered like large mirrors. The tall, expansive ceiling was supported by twenty colossal pillars of white jade that lined the sides of the hall, each as wide as three men together. They were intricately carved with reliefs of whimsical clouds and water.

Six elegant taishi armchairs were set at the far end of the great hall. An elder with both white hair and beard sat in the center-west seat. He was stern and commanded an aura of authority. Behind him stood a charming girl wearing pink. In the center-east seat sat a man with an aloof, calm visage, and behind him stood an extraordinarily gallant woman. They were the cultivators of Xiqian Peak and Xihua Peak, respectively. At their sides were two more chairs each, in which rested the other four peak lords, with their own disciples behind them. Aside from the peak lords, there were about a dozen others who occupied the great hall.

One particular gentleman was in a standoff with ten disciples in Cangya's uniforms.

"How can you convict someone before the case has been fully investigated?" he demanded.

"What else is there to investigate?! Is our personal experience not enough evidence?"

"Heh." The gentleman fanned his folding fan derisively. "So, what you're saying, Shidi, is that the sect leader, my dashixiong, the peak lords, and our fellow disciples have come for nothing today? All this effort mobilizing the masses for a sham trial."

Even though he was arguing one against ten, he was calm and at ease. It didn't take many rounds before the ten disciples found themselves at a loss for words.

The elder in the head seat frowned slightly.

Suddenly, a commotion erupted outside the hall, and any whispers fell away as the sea of disciples parted to make a path. Noticing the change, the ones inside the hall turned their attention to the entrance.

Step by step, a young man in black with white hair flowing down his back approached the hall and crossed the tall threshold. His detached eyes showed no emotion.

Everyone drew a sharp breath at the sight of him. Silence descended on the hall.

Yin Biyue had to bite back his urge to scream at everyone gawking at him. *What're you looking at, huh? So what if I've got scene-kid hair? Even a Shamate*[9] *cultivation boy deserves respect, okay?!*

“Shidi, your hair…”

Yin Biyue met Liu Qishuang’s concerned eyes as he stepped into the hall. “I am fine.” After some thought, he added, “Don’t worry, Shijie.”

But Liu Qishuang was even more worried now that she’d seen him.

A resounding elderly voice rang out, tolling like a bell reverberating across the empty hills. “The fourth disciple of the Cangya Mountains’ Xihua Peak, Yin Biyue!”

Yin Biyue froze at the call. When he raised his eyes, he saw the elder in the head seat of the west glare at him with electrifying intensity. A master at the Great Ascension cultivation level possessed the power to strike awe into another’s heart even when their repressive might was completely withheld.

The OG Yin Biyue’s memory flashed to life and identified the elder: *Sect Leader Zhengyangzi.*

Yin Biyue stood tall and gave a proper bow. “The disciple is present!”

“On the seventh of last month, thirty-two disciples testified that you cast the killing array, the Crimson Omen, within the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament with the intention of murdering your peers. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Yin Biyue looked around at everyone in the hall. Although this was a public trial, only those with power were given seats. Aside from his titular master, the other five peak lords were present with their trusted disciples. They appeared either indifferent or disdainful.

In his master’s seat sat a man with a chilling gaze and indiscernible mood. The words *Dashixiong Jun Yu* blinked through Yin Biyue’s mind.

Behind him stood Liu Qishuang, her brow deeply furrowed with worry.

Standing closer to Yin Biyue were ten disciples in Cangya uniforms who glared at him with burning rage. They were probably the representatives of the thirty-two who had encountered danger within the secret realm. As for the imposing, finely dressed gentleman who remained composed and at ease, Yin Biyue's memory had yet to provide an identity. He grew anxious. Where was Luo Mingchuan? Where had Luo Mingchuan gone?

Zhengyangzi frowned.

"No, I have nothing to say," Yin Biyue answered impassively. It was an admission of guilt. Many relaxed at his response, as if that settled things. Someone even scoffed.

"What was the motive behind your action? Did you have any grievances? Were you under the spell of another or following someone's commands? Such grave crimes warrant the stripping of your cultivation and expelling you from the sect, never to set foot in the Cangya Mountains for the rest of your life. Do you understand?"

Yin Biyue panicked. The tone of Zhengyangzi's interrogation made it obvious he was going through procedures as a formality. Meanwhile, Yin Biyue had no evidence to credibly justify his actions. The reason he'd said "no" was to stay in character. That part of his memories was too hazy; any excuse he came up with would be full of holes. Now, it was too late to pretend he'd been suffering in silence. In the worst case scenario, he'd have to weep and desperately repent…

The finely dressed gentleman snapped his fan shut and stepped forward to shield Yin Biyue behind him.

Yin Biyue eyed this man anew. In solemn and dignified Cangya, it was strange to see someone dressed in a set of long robes embroidered with clusters of begonia flowers. Around his waist was a woven jade-green belt, and his hair was fastened with a crown of rose gold. Despite his flashy dress, he exuded a noble air rather than a vulgar and extravagant one.

When memories of this man finally rose in Yin Biyue's mind, the corner of his mouth flickered. Aside from his hatred of the protagonist, the OG didn't have strong feelings about anyone else. His memory only provided simple labels such as *Dashixiong Jun Yu* and *Ershijie Liu Qishuang*. But when it came to this man, there was actually a short description!

Chatterbox. Wushidi,[10] *Duan Chongxuan.*

Since when did Xihua Peak have a quirky character like that?! Regardless, it was unexpected that this man was willing to defend him even when Yin Biyue had never spoken to him before. Duan Chongxuan was just about to say something when someone beat him to it.

"Please wait a moment!"

The crowd turned their heads to see a handsome young man in plain Daoist robes enter the hall. He was gripping his sword. His hair fell loosely behind his back; his expression was resolute.

The hall erupted into chaos inside and out, boiling over with noise.

"Wh—Luo-shixiong!"

"Why is he carrying his sword? Is he here to personally punish this Yin guy?"

"Doesn't look that way with the way he's dressed."

Zhengyangzi's brows knit together. The girl in pink behind him gasped. Yin Biyue watched as Luo Mingchuan stepped into the hall and brushed past him. Luo Mingchuan's eyes were focused forward.

Perfect timing, Protagonist! I'm counting on you for support!

Luo Mingchuan marched to about ten feet away from Zhengyangzi and dropped heavily to his knees, which banged on the gray tiles.

"This disciple has something to say!" he cried in a loud and confident voice.

Everyone was taken aback by this sudden turn of events.

Zhengyangzi felt his eyelid twitch. At his level of cultivation, he could glimpse into the secrets of the universe and possessed a keen premonition of what was to come. He didn't know what Luo Mingchuan was about to say, but instinct told him it wasn't good. It was a deeply ominous feeling.

"Quiet!" he shouted without hesitation. "It is not your place to speak!"

Luo Mingchuan kowtowed, and his forehead hit the ground with an audible thud. But before he could speak, he was cut short.

"Silence!" Zhengyangzi admonished again. As soon as he spoke the word, Luo Mingchuan lost his voice. Yin Biyue hung his head.

Protagonist, you're trying too hard. You didn't need to come in with guns blazing. All you needed to do was say a few soft words to plead for leniency. Your shifu thought of you as his own son. He would've considered your feelings!

The observers outside the hall were spilling over with excitement as countless disciples craned their necks to see what was happening.

“Hey! Why did Luo-shixiong kneel?!”

“Move it, you’re blocking my view.”

It was mayhem as the disciplinary disciples guarding the door blocked the onlookers.

Back inside the hall, all eyes were on Sect Leader Zhengyangzi and Luo Mingchuan. Many were surprised. What did the sect leader mean? Luo Mingchuan clearly had something to say—could there be more to the story than met the eyes?

They turned their gazes to the man sitting in Xihua Peak’s head seat, who remained stoic, his emotions indiscernible.

Zhengyangzi drew in a deep breath and waved his hand in dismissal. “The verdict of the trial will be announced tomorrow. Rest assured, an answer will be provided. Peak lords and the disciples of Xihua Peak, stay. The rest of you may go.”

Judging by his tone, the talk would continue behind closed doors. The disciples standing behind the peak lords tactfully withdrew.

The group that had been arguing with Duan Chongxuan glanced at the kneeling Luo Mingchuan. One of them stepped forward.

“We trust Luo-shixiong!” he proclaimed. Then they retreated from the hall too.

Duan Chongxuan stood back behind Jun Yu as the disciplinary disciples dispersed the crowd outside the hall. With a muted bang, the

massive doors closed, separating the hall from the outside world. As the noise outside died down, some of the gossip also did.

Yin Biyue studied those who remained. They were Cangya's core powers. But the protagonist sure was beloved—those disciples didn't say they trusted the sect leader or Xihua Peak. They specifically said they trusted Luo Mingchuan.

Tsk, tsk.

His unearned peers were impressive. None of them left, not even the little servant child. Oh, wait. That seemed to have been Jun Yu's page?

Zhengyangzi released the silence spell. "What do you have to say?" he asked in a grave voice.

Kneeling in the center of the hall, Luo Mingchuan glanced back over his shoulder. The jade tiles reflected the white-haired young man's upstanding frame. His thin lips were pursed, his eyes calm. For some reason, the sight of Yin Biyue eased Luo Mingchuan's troubled mind. No matter the outcome, he knew he wouldn't regret his decision.

Thus, everyone inside the hall heard his loud, confident voice declare: "This disciple is willing to take the punishment for Yin-shidi!"

Chapter 7

EVERYONE'S FACE changed at Luo Mingchuan's declaration. All of them, including Yin Biyue, were stunned.

"Luo-shixiong, what are you saying?!" He Yanyun cried.

Zhengyangzi's beard bristled with anger. "Don't be ridiculous! Why should you take his place? What does his crime have to do with you?"

The peak lord of Xiling Peak, Cheng Antai, cleared his throat. "As Luo-shizhi[11] is the victim, there has to be more to this case for him to speak this way. An explanation must be given for the cause of the crime."

Cheng Antai hailed from the Disciplinary Hall and was the current Disciplinary Elder. He loved logic. As soon as he spoke up, the others present nodded in agreement.

Yin Biyue felt there was something off about Luo Mingchuan today, but he told himself to not worry about it. A legendary assist was never a bad thing.

Luo Mingchuan drew in a deep breath. An explanation? If he hadn't used the Ghara Pupil Technique, he would probably never have known the reason behind it all. But his shidi was still so young—Yin Biyue's affection was nothing more than temporary dependence. In the future, when he matured, who was to say he wouldn't encounter a girl he fancied? After all, harmony between yin and yang was the true, proper path. If Luo Mingchuan proclaimed that Yin Biyue was in love with him, would that trap him on the wrong road?

Yin Biyue was proud to the bone. He must not want anyone to know about his forbidden feelings. Besides, all of this was Luo Mingchuan's fault in the first place. He bowed his head.

"It wasn't Shidi's fault, it was mine. Years ago while drunk, I… attempted to force myself on him. Shidi only wanted to teach me a lesson. He had no intention to harm or involve anyone else! Everything was my fault. I am willing to take full responsibility for the incident that endangered Cangya's thirty-two disciples!"

It was silent in the hall. Attempted to force himself on the boy? While drunk? What did that imply? He couldn't possibly mean what he was saying?

Yin Biyue was the first to fully process what Luo Mingchuan had said, and his eyes bulged. He went from cool and detached to panicked and indignant.

"Luo Mingchuan! What nonsense are you spouting?!"

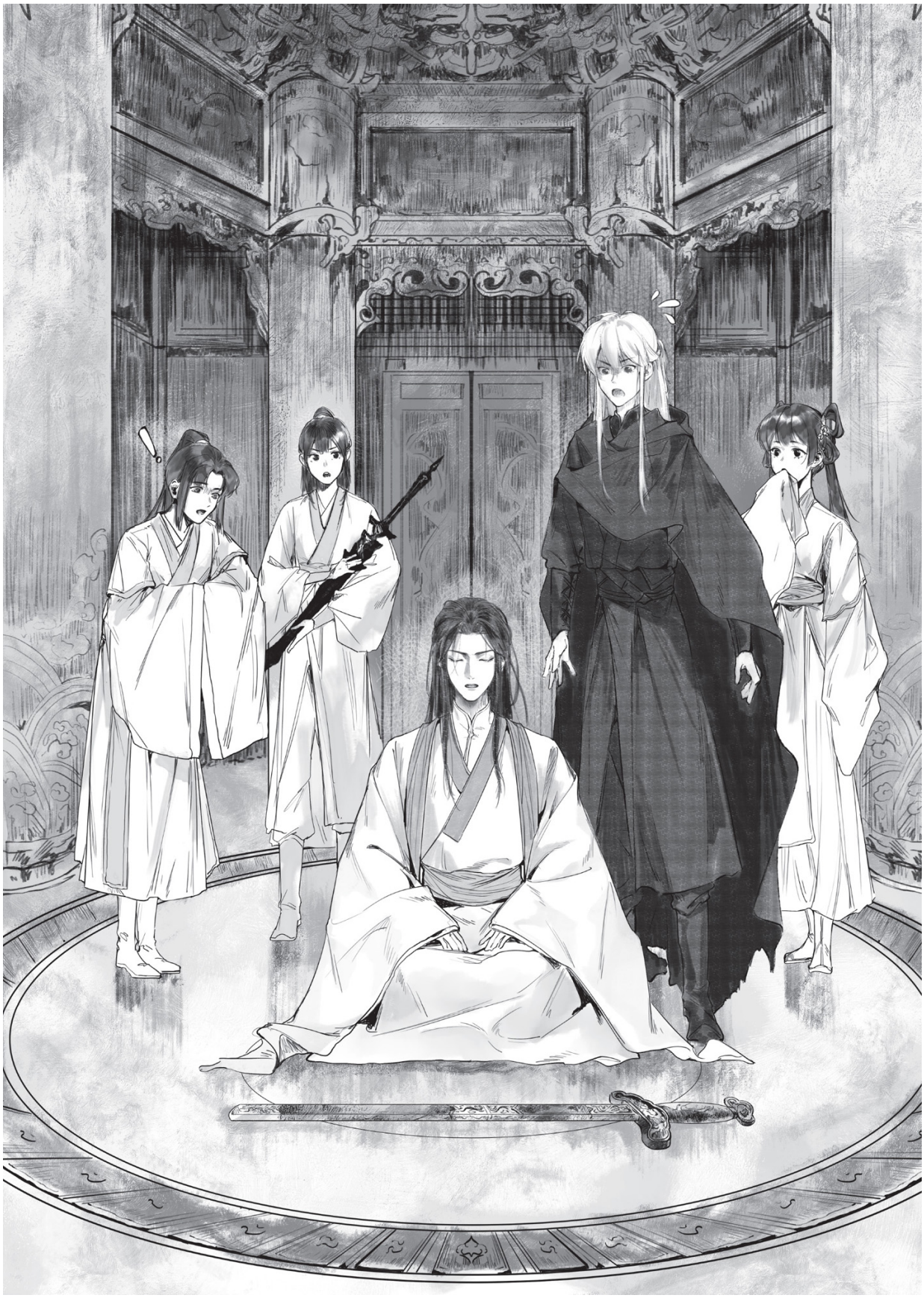
The others were flabbergasted. Could what Luo Mingchuan said have been true? Why would Yin Biyue be so furious otherwise? Was he trying to cover it up?

To make matters worse, Cheng Antai questioned Luo Mingchuan further. "Luo-shizhi, that is not something you should carelessly claim. Is it really true?"

All sorts of astonished and uncertain looks flitted around the hall. Zhengyangzi, pale and ashen-faced, pointed an accusatory finger at Luo Mingchuan and sputtered, unable to speak.

"I am a miscreant and a disgrace to my master and Cangya. I am unworthy to wield this sword. Today, here in Qinghe Hall, I submit myself

to any punishment,” Luo Mingchuan said. He banged his head hard on the floor again before he presented his longsword with both hands.



This was Chenzhou, the sword Zhengyangzi had bestowed upon Luo Mingchuan when he first joined the sect as a martial cultivator. It was a work of art that the master swordsmith Yan Qing had spent ten painstaking years to forge—a true gentleman's sword. At the time, who would've expected Luo Mingchuan was better suited to spiritual cultivation?

After Luo Mingchuan's spiritual powers awakened, Zhengyangzi didn't want the sword back, so his disciple had kept it. Seeing it now, Zhengyangzi was seized with anger. He didn't believe that Luo Mingchuan had done such a despicable thing, but he also knew his disciple never lied. He was so torn that he couldn't breathe.

Yin Biyue wanted to scream even more than Zhengyangzi did. How had things turned out this way?! Yes, he wanted to be exonerated, but not like *this*!

Why was this the idea you had in mind, Protagonist?! If this gets out, my chance of becoming the Final Boss will go up in smoke!

Before he could say anything, however, he was interrupted.

Liu Qishuang stepped forward and reproached him in a voice full of grief. "Shidi, how could you not tell us? Did you think that Xihua Peak wouldn't protect you?!"

Shijie, not now! Your timing is awful!

"There is no grievance—I was never a good person to begin with!" Yin Biyue blurted in a moment of panic.

‹Ding! The villainous line "I was never a good person to begin with" has appeared. Conditions met. The halo is now activated!›

Yin Biyue was almost moved to tears. Just in time! What a life-saving halo!

He Yanyun wanted to argue for Luo Mingchuan's sake, but for some reason, when her eyes fell on the young man standing in the center of the hall, she suddenly couldn't find the words she wanted to say.

Since he'd entered the hall, Yin Biyue had not offered a word of explanation or any change in expression in the face of public accusation and mockery. It wasn't until Luo Mingchuan spoke up that he grew agitated and his voice rose like he had a secret to keep.

"I was never a good person to begin with!"

Who would say that about themselves? He had actually suffered deep grievances, hadn't he?

It wasn't just He Yanyun. The same thought surfaced in almost everyone present. Yin Biyue swiftly noticed something was wrong. The stares directed at him were becoming strange—they glistened with sympathy, pity, and regret. At the same time, the ones directed at Luo Mingchuan were conflicted and indignant.

No, wait, wasn't the halo activated? Why was this happening? What happened to *"Anyone will cry in fear from a single look?!"*

Duan Chongxuan stepped forward and stood beside Liu Qishuang. "Shixiong," he said to Yin Biyue, "are you being threatened? Is that why you don't want to tell the truth?"

A thought struck Liu Qishuang. "When I paid Shidi a visit half a month ago, his hair was black, but now it's white. Isn't that suspicious?"

No, no, no, stop that train of thought!

Before Yin Biyue could protest, Duan Chongxuan continued, "Shijie, don't worry. White hair is mostly a sign of qi deviation. Although our sect

leader sealed Shixiong's cultivation, he would never lead him down the deviant path." Then he turned to Luo Mingchuan. "And Luo-shixiong, don't be silly. You're the chief disciple of Cangya. Your status is high and precious. How can you casually take punishment for someone else?"

"Y-you—!" Zhengyangzi exclaimed. "Absolute nonsense!"

What Duan Chongxuan said had been a backhanded compliment. He not only criticized Luo Mingchuan's misconduct and reliance on his influence to bully others but also subtly mocked Zhengyangzi as a biased sect leader who, to protect his own disciple, charged Yin Biyue before the case was fully investigated. Duan Chongxuan even attempted to link Yin Biyue's white hair to him. Every word he spoke hit hard.

Sure enough, the gazes of the others grew critical.

Just then, the man in Xihua Peak's seat spoke up. "Step down, Duan-shidi."

He wasn't loud, but his voice carried a subtle power. It spread far and wide like glacial ice and penetrated the heart of everyone present.

Yin Biyue's eyes traveled to the source of the voice: Jun Yu. It was Yin Biyue's first time studying the man. He was clad in long, black robes with crossed lapels, free of adornments, and his jet-black hair cascaded down his back. His eyes were as sharp as blades, and his lips were as thin as delicate cicada wings. Even though he sat with simple poise, he resembled a divine weapon that struck fear into those who dared to gaze upon him.

Until now, this dour man had only spoken once. When he was silent, he was nearly invisible. Yet when he opened his mouth, all took notice. Even Duan Chongxuan and Liu Qishuang mutely stepped back to their places behind him. Everyone quieted down and waited to hear his stance.

Zhengyangzi breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness there was Jun Yu, who was reasonable and reserved, the deserving pupil of Wei Jingfeng, the eldest disciple of Xihua Peak…

Then Zhengyangzi watched as the object of his praise turned his head to his page and said, “Get my sword.”

Zhengyangzi’s sight went dim.

The page stepped out immediately. The entire hall stilled. Some time passed. Zhengyangzi cleared his throat and was about to say something to break the uncomfortable silence when the page returned carrying a sword case. All eyes shot toward the vessel as if trying to see through the aged peachwood.

It’s all over, Zhengyangzi wailed inwardly. Xihua Peak’s bad habit was showing itself again: protecting their own in the most unreasonable ways. Wei Jingfeng was gone, but here came Jun Yu!

As if things weren’t bad enough, Luo Mingchuan spoke up again. “Shifu, every word I say is true. I am willing to take the blame for endangering Cangya’s thirty-two disciples.”

Zhengyangzi really wanted to throw him to Xihua Peak and be done with it! But…no matter how much of a scoundrel Luo Mingchuan was, he’d been the one to raise him. Zhengyangzi sighed and turned to Yin Biyue again.

“Yin-shizhi, has my vile disciple truly wronged you?” he asked in a soft voice.

“Nothing of the sort happened! He’s got nothing to do with any of this!” Yin Biyue was practically on his knees. At last, it was his—the concerned party’s—time to speak! But in the back of his head, there was

almost an unfeeling electronic voice that rang: *Beep, beep. Your teammate's IQ has gone offline.*

Xiping Peak's lord cleared his throat and broke in with his two cents. "In my opinion, perhaps Luo-shizhi has developed an unrequited affection for Yin-shizhi. Young people can be impulsive, but no major mistakes were made. Ahem. Jun-shizhi, put your sword away. This isn't anything that can't be solved by talking, wouldn't you agree?"

Xiping Peak were experts at making concessions to avoid trouble, collapsing mountains back into molehills. Zhengyangzi had always hated their unprincipled, compromise-everything approach. But right now, he nodded in eager agreement. "Yes, that's right!"

Xiling Peak's lord spoke up again. "The private affairs between young people are best resolved among themselves. After all, it would be inappropriate if they were punished severely for this and the verdict is publicized."

The other peak lords joined in the chorus of agreement. "Indeed, indeed."

Liu Qishuang pondered the sentiment. She didn't care about Luo Mingchuan, but publicizing the case would be bad for her shidi's reputation. Naturally, the others arrived at the same conclusion. Jun Yu set a graceful hand upon the sword case. Almost simultaneously, the resonant hum of the sword echoed deep within everyone's soul. It startled them.

Once more, his icy voice rang out. "Today's affair ends here. Those present must not divulge any word of it." He turned his eyes toward Zhengyangzi.

Zhengyangzi understood that Jun Yu was asking for his opinion as a way to let him save face. He reiterated Jun Yu's words quickly. "Yes. Please remember, everyone, that this result must not be divulged."

Jun Yu nodded, passed his sword case back to his page, and rose to his feet. Liu Qishuang and Duan Chongxuan followed behind him.

Yin Biyue watched as his unearned peers approached him, his insides twisting into a giant knot. What should he say? Thank you? But their assist had been way off target. Now, it seemed like Luo Mingchuan really almost did something to him! But how could he not say thank you? They went above and beyond their duty to help the OG, with whom they shared barely any friendship. Where had a villain gotten such protective peers? God. Did he walk onto the wrong set?

It didn't take long before Yin Biyue realized he was overthinking things. When Jun Yu came before him, he couldn't utter a word. Jun Yu raised a hand from his expansive sleeves and touched the center of Yin Biyue's forehead with his index finger.

Clear, cool qi flowed from his fingertip and entered Yin Biyue's chest. Like a gurgling spring, it streamed through his body. The invisible shackles disappeared wherever Jun Yu's qi touched. Sublime vital qi gushed from Yin Biyue's conception vessel[12] and surged into his every limb. It was as if every inch of his muscles had been stretched and every piece of bone filled with strength. He felt refreshed and invigorated. Jun Yu had unsealed his cultivation.

Yin Biyue was a little stunned. It felt so good to have power again.

"It is not qi deviation," Jun Yu said mildly to the crowd. To the two behind him, he said, "Take Shidi back to rest."

Duan Chongxuan snickered. “Sishixiong[13] indeed needs rest after all this.”

“I will ask for Elder Ning to give Sishidi a full checkup at once,” Liu Qishuang answered for them both.

Yin Biyue was basically hauled out of Qinghe Hall by the pair.

The other peak lords also rose to their feet and took their leave.

Luo Mingchuan was staring at Yin Biyue’s retreating back when a figure blocked his view. Jun Yu stopped three steps away from him and looked Luo Mingchuan in the eyes, pinning him in place. A devastating chill rushed over him—it was a fear akin to teetering at the precipice of an abyss, or sensing deadly blades suspended above his head. He was ready to believe that the sword that could cleave mountains and flatten Cangya was about to burst from its case and pierce his chest. It felt as if he was being tormented in the freezing tundra for ten years when, in fact, it was just a few heartbeats.

Eventually, Jun Yu turned and left. Luo Mingchuan bent down and gasped raggedly for breath. Only then did he notice that cold sweat had drenched his clothes.

He Yanyun watched the exchange from nearby, stupefied. She only dared to run over to Luo Mingchuan after Jun Yu was gone, but even after several attempts, she still couldn’t pull him up.

“Luo-shixiong,” she cried frantically. “Luo-shixiong, are you all right? What’s wrong?”

Zhengyangzi hadn’t moved to stop Jun Yu. He knew he couldn’t, and that no great harm would come to Luo Mingchuan; it was a minor scolding

and major warning. Jun Yu had shown mercy. Zhengyangzi breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness the mess was over.

He was planning on dragging his disciple home to give him a sound beating when he watched said disciple straighten up and run out the door to chase after Xihua Peak's eldest disciple.

"Let me see Shidi! I have something to say to him!" Luo Mingchuan called to Jun Yu.

I'll kill you, you damned, death-seeking idiot!

Chapter 8

THE ADMINISTRATIVE HALL of the Cangya Mountains was a bustling place, and not only because it was where sect members collected mission orders. Everyone, from the north to the south, was happy to stop here to chat, gossip, and expand their network, greatly enriching the social aspect of their difficult cultivator lives.

"How did the verdict end up like this? Surely Luo-shixiong wasn't in the wrong!"

"What sort of punishment is house arrest for a month? Seclusion means nothing to that guy from Xihua Peak. He can go into seclusion for six months without breaking a sweat. On the other hand, Luo-shixiong has plenty of responsibilities in Cangya. How will this affect us?"

"It might not have been preferential treatment for Xihua Peak. I had a good seat at the trial. Luo-shixiong ran into the hall with his hair down, holding his sword in both hands. It really looked like he went to admit fault," a quiet voice piped up. "Do you think the outcome…might have been affected by the Sword Sage's name?"

At the mention of the Sword Sage, the crowd's voices dropped to whispers.

All of a sudden, a boy who'd been standing quietly in a corner raised his voice. "What do you know?!"

The crowd looked up. Cheng Xi from the Disciplinary Hall was the one who'd spoken. Someone slid over and put an arm around his shoulder.

“Well, now. What do you know about it, you little runt? I heard you were part of the group to escort that Xihua Peak guy from the dungeon to the trial.”

Cheng Xi gazed confidently at the crowd. “Yin-shishu is a good person. If you ever met him, you’d never believe the rumors!”

He was surrounded by a number of eager gossips, so his declaration caused an immediate commotion. Someone pulled over a bench and a cup of tea for Cheng Xi to sit and soothe his throat, all the better for him to share his tale.

***

COMPARED TO THE BUZZING outside, Yin Biyue’s courtyard on Xihua Peak was much quieter—even if Duan Chongxuan hadn’t left yet.

“Shixiong, this is the medicine Elder Ning prescribed earlier. Drink it while it’s hot.

“Shixiong, you’re so gifted. Your future is infinite! Don’t let that guy get to you.

“Shixiong, if there’s anything bothering you, you can talk to me.”

Yin Biyue, who was in bed sipping his medicine, nearly spat it out. *What’s going on in that head of yours, Shidi?!*

He cleared his throat. “Shidi, I want serenity—” *And don’t ask me who Serenity is!*

He never should have questioned the OG's description! In his defense, who would believe that a noble, elegant young master really was such a chatterbox?!

"No. Shijie has asked me to take good care of you, so I must," Duan Chongxuan declared. "Shixiong, don't get up. What do you want? I'll grab it for you."

Enough. I'm not disabled!

Yin Biyue sighed heavily. "Wushidi, I can feel my vital qi circulating smoothly. Besides, Elder Ning said there is no damage to my sea of conception. As for my white hair, we don't have answers just now, so you and Ershijie shouldn't trouble yourselves…"

He trailed off when he caught sight of Duan Chongxuan's astonished face. Yin Biyue tensed—had he gone OOC? Ugh, that was right; the OG would never have spoken this much!

He snapped his mouth shut, but it was too late. Duan Chongxuan moved his stool closer to the bed, his face beaming with surprise and anticipation.

"Sishixiong, I knew it. I knew you're talkative deep down!"

Yin Biyue was appalled. "I…am not."

"I don't believe you!"

Fine. If they must chat, they might as well discuss business.

"I was in seclusion a year ago when you entered the sect," Yin Biyue said. "We have not crossed paths before now, and I haven't done my duty as a shixiong to watch over you. I must thank you for speaking in my defense earlier at Qinghe Hall."

Rather than expressing his gratitude, the speech was more of a probe. Yin Biyue could understand the actions of Jun Yu and Liu Qishuang; those stemmed from their senses of duty as his shixiong and shijie. Duan Chongxuan was more of a mystery. If he had acted simply because of their peerage, then he was beyond righteous.

"Why so formal, Sishixiong?" Duan Chongxuan said. "I still remember your first statement to me was a long one! You…sort of ignored me afterward, but I always knew you were the chatty type underneath."

How the heck did we round back to that?

Oh, Yin Biyue remembered now. At the time, he said: *"My name is Yin Biyue. I entered the sect two years before you and am therefore your fourth shixiong. I am usually training in the Fourth Courtyard of this peak. If you encounter any questions in your studies, you may transmit them to me via jade slips. Otherwise, do not disturb me."*

Did that count as a long statement?! It sounded more like: *I'm your sishixiong. Now leave me alone, you sonuvabitch!*

Yin Biyue pressed a hand to his forehead. "Is conversation very important to you?"

"Not necessarily," Duan Chongxuan said. His face grew nostalgic. "Back home, I had to talk a lot. Nice things, unpleasant things, truths, lies, words others wanted to hear, words of authority and mercy, words I didn't mean… The reason I joined the sect was to find peace and quiet. I wanted to go to the most tranquil place on earth. But it's *too* quiet here!

"Dashixiong[14] doesn't say more than three sentences a year," he continued in a tragic voice. "I counted. He actually spoke four to you today. I doubt he'll talk again before next year. Ershijie doesn't like to say much

either. Sanshixiong[15] talks a bit more, but it's drunken chatter, not to mention he's rarely around. I can't always talk to Shifu's portrait. After all, Shifu isn't dead, so he wouldn't be happy with me if I did!"

Now I'm even more curious why Shifu took you in at all, Yin Biyue thought.

Duan Chongxuan poured himself a cup of Junshan Mist tea. "Thank goodness I have you, Sishixiong!"

Yin Biyue's mouth twitched. A chatterbox's friendship was so simple.

Duan Chongxuan poured Yin Biyue a cup as well. "I understand. You must be feeling pent-up after going through such an ordeal. It's natural to want to talk it out with someone, even if it's just to curse that beast in human clothing."

"Shidi, you're mistaken. There's really nothing between us!"

Duan Chongxuan sighed. "If you don't want to discuss your grief, we can talk about something else. That's right! These are some things that the beast gave you. He was adamant that I mustn't refuse, so I accepted them on your behalf. If the sight of them bothers you, just toss them. Our Xihua Peak has plenty of these already."

Yin Biyue's feelings toward Luo Mingchuan were complicated. Back at Qinghe Hall, he'd been so enraged that he'd felt compelled to stab the man's crotch with his sword. With his fury now subsided, all that remained was a conflicted knot in his stomach. How out there was Luo Mingchuan's thought process to have come up with *that*?! Young people these days… Yin Biyue just couldn't understand them.

Nevertheless, he accepted the white porcelain bottle and the spiritual lingzhi from Duan Chongxuan.

“Where’s Luo-shixiong?” Yin Biyue asked.

“He left, of course. As if he has any right to see you,” Duan Chongxuan replied glibly.

But that wasn’t quite the truth.

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LUO MINGCHUAN STOOD outside Xihua Peak’s barrier, unable to enter.

“I wish to see Shidi!” he shouted.

“I’m afraid Sishixiong has sustained internal injury from his long imprisonment in the Cangya Dungeon,” Duan Chongxuan answered.

“Oh, well, I have three rejuvenation pills of the ninth grade!”

Duan Chongxuan took the eagerly proffered porcelain bottle and let out a grim sigh. “The dungeon is dark and cold…”

“I also have a Jadefire Ganoderma. Won’t you let me see him?” Luo Mingchuan said, beseeching.

With the pill bottle and the spiritual lingzhi in hand, Duan Chongxuan waved Luo Mingchuan away. “I’ll deliver the items for you. Goodbye, Luo-shixiong.”

On his way back, Duan Chongxuan encountered Liu Qishuang, who was descending the peak.

“Did Luo Mingchuan come by just now?” she asked.

“I didn’t let him in,” Duan Chongxuan said. “As if he could walk through our doors so easily after harming Sishixiong like that. And I couldn’t let him off without paying a price, either!”

Liu Qishuang nodded in silent agreement. “I’m off to speak to Dashixiong regarding this matter. Take care of Shidi.”

She was gone before Duan Chongxuan could say more.

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YIN BIYUE FROWNED. Luo Mingchuan’s actions didn’t make a lick of sense. First he fabricated such an outlandish excuse, and now he was giving him gifts—as if he had really done Yin Biyue wrong…?

Ugh, no way!

When Liu Qishuang showed up at Yin Biyue’s courtyard, she found him still frowning, his eyebrows knit together.

“Shidi, I checked the records in the library,” she said. “Your hair turning white may be suspicious, but there is a good chance for a cure. You need not worry.” Then she raised a hand to stop Yin Biyue from rolling out of bed.

He groaned in exasperation. “Ershijie, I really am fine now.”

She shook her head in disapproval. “The dungeon is a unique structure that’s harmful to its prisoners. If you don’t take care in your recovery and damage your spiritual meridian as a result, you’ll encounter

difficulties in your future cultivation. It's better to stay in bed for the next few days."

Yin Biyue couldn't argue with that.

"Rest well. See Dashixiong after you have fully recovered. Duan-shidi and I shall not bother you," she concluded.

Yin Biyue nodded. "Thank you for your concern. Take care, Ershijie, Wushidi."

Duan Chongxuan looked like he wanted to chat some more, but after a glance at Liu Qishuang, he quietly filed out with her.

Yin Biyue rose from bed. He had already entered the state of Spirit Concentration, so simple meditation could substitute for sleep. In the past, the OG had practiced daily with the sword in the peak's cold pool. He'd train while the sun was out and retire to the tranquility room to meditate at night. It'd been a long time since he last stepped foot in a bedroom. Besides, his vital qi was humming smoothly. There was no need to stay put. It was probably the medical cultivator Elder Ning who, unable to find the cause for the white hair but cornered by Liu Qishuang's relentless questioning, had muttered something to the effect of "emotionally repressed," "in need of more bed rest," and "refrain from brooding."

What nonsense. How could she believe that? It was just an unconventional hair color; he didn't care at all!

What's wrong with being a quiet Shamate Boy?!

Yin Biyue walked out and studied his small courtyard. White walled and gray tiled, its layout and decoration were simple without any unnecessary adornments. Facing south, the entrance of the courtyard

overlooked Tianxin Cliff where, in the far distance, dots of green pines and cedars could be spotted in the swirling sea of clouds.

A barrier had been cast on the entrance gate that prohibited unwelcome visitors and blocked spiritual prying. He struck it with his vital qi. Instantly, the barrier rippled into intricate patterns that formed images of the Eight Gates and Nine Palaces of Qimen Dunjia.[16] They spun in endless spirals. If an intruder attempted to force entry, the barrier would use the momentum of their attack and rebound it on them.

Yin Biyue vaguely recalled encountering similar techniques in a xianxia world he had once transmigrated to. It would appear the OG knew some spiritual arts in addition to his sword. Transmigrating so many times had its benefits, like enriching his knowledge. There were always similarities to be found across experiences.

He pushed open the door to the tranquility room and immediately felt every fiber of his being tense. Sharp qi loomed just out of range. Gathering himself, he stepped inside. Although this was a place of meditation and not where he'd practiced the sword, cutting sword qi filled the room. As Yin Biyue walked around, an enormous pressure poured in from every part of the room and pressed down on him.

The tranquility room was split into an inner and outer chamber. The outer chamber was more like a study. A desk with brushes and inkstones stood in the center, and along the east wall was a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf filled with scrolls of jade slips and stitched books. A short divan peppered with meditation cushions was installed against the wall in the inside chamber.

Yin Biyue closed his eyes and concentrated so he could feel the flow of vital qi in this room. Sure enough, there was an array here as well. If anyone were to attack the barrier on the entrance gate during his meditation in the tranquility room, he could strike at the array here, which would transmit his attack to the main gate.

When Yin Biyue had first joined Xihua Peak, many who were dissatisfied with his presence had come to challenge him to a fight. He had cleverly remained in this room and knocked them down the mountain without stepping a single foot outside the door, a feat as straightforward as it was arrogant. With how many he offended, it was no surprise that as soon as he landed in trouble, they lined up to kick him while he was down.

As he sat on a meditation cushion, Yin Biyue's confusion only deepened.

The sword intent suffusing this space was indomitably honed. Why would someone so immersed in cultivation want to kill Luo Mingchuan? Was it really jealousy?

He couldn't be sure for the moment, but he didn't bother wasting more time trying to discern the OG's mind. He had more important business at hand.

He gripped the sword hanging at his side. The sword had been confiscated when he entered the dungeon, but Jun Yu's page had returned it to him after the trial. When he saw the sword, for a fleeting moment, he'd felt it far more terrifying than the sight of Jun Yu's peachwood sword case.

It was a solid-black weapon, uncarved and unornamented, of about three feet and two inches. Despite its thinness, it was deceptively hefty. There was no sheen to the metal when it was drawn from its sheath, and

when Yin Biyue injected it with his vital qi, it remained as useless as a mud ox in the sea. The sword refused to recognize him.

It was very strange. Could a spiritless sword recognize its master? He was a martial cultivator—a sword cultivator at that. Even if he retained his cultivation level, without the ability to wield his sword, he was no different from a child who had inherited a mountain of treasure but knew nothing of it. That was his present, most pressing problem. Whether it be the bleeding-heart protagonist with an incomprehensible mind, his clearance-sale shifu who existed only in legends, or his protective peers who seemed to have walked onto the wrong set—they all had to step aside. To survive in this world and become the ultimate villain—not just cannon fodder who wouldn’t live past a transition scene—he needed *power*.

Chapter 9

XIHUA PEAK'S NUMBERS WERE FEW. Apart from the ever-locked chief courtyard belonging to the Sword Sage, there were five courtyards scattered about the peak. They went in order, beginning with the First Courtyard of Jun Yu, the eldest disciple. The architectural style and size of each building was entirely up to the owner.

The peers Yin Biyue thought of as misplaced actors were currently gathered in Jun Yu's courtyard for a meeting.

Jun Yu's residence was even more basic than he was. There was no extra furniture or decoration, and even the round stool Duan Chongxuan used for the assembly was one he brought himself.

Despite calling it an assembly, the only ones in attendance were Jun Yu, Liu Qishuang, and Duan Chongxuan. The third disciple, Yan Xing, was out traveling the world and hadn't been back to the peak in a long time. Were it not for the incident, these disciples probably wouldn't have gathered until the Sword Sage's return, which might not happen for another hundred years.

Flapping his fan, Duan Chongxuan started the meeting. "I went to talk to Sishixiong today. He was earnest with me and didn't find me a nuisance."

"I agree that the present Lao-si[17] is friendly and courteous, truly a contrast from his usual dour reticence," Liu Qishuang said with a nod. "In a way, we are all responsible for what happened."

Jun Yu nodded, though he did not speak.

“It would appear that Shidi is not a glum individual by nature,” Liu Qishuang continued. “He probably became that way after the shock of what happened with Luo Mingchuan.”

Duan Chongxuan analyzed the case, and the group came to this conclusion: Yin Biyue usually didn’t interact with others, not even with his peers of the same peak. This was a result of the hurt caused by Luo Mingchuan. As Yin Biyue’s peers, *they* were to blame for not providing support in a timely manner. Their present, most urgent priority was to consider follow-up care for Yin Biyue’s trauma.

“Don’t worry, Dashixiong, I will visit Sishixiong more frequently to chat with him!” Duan Chongxuan said decisively.

Jun Yu nodded again. Then, with a hint of a line between his brows, he said, “The white hair affliction.”

His words sounded out of the blue, but the other two understood right away.

“I’m worried about it!” Liu Qishuang said. “Though there aren’t any problems at present, what if a hidden issue remains that manifests in the future?”

After purification, a cultivator’s body was different from ordinary humans and could not be diagnosed via common sense. Cultivation was an unpredictable process and bizarre accidents—like spontaneous combustion and self-implosion—were possible. Manifesting white hair in a short period of time was generally an aftereffect of qi deviation. Yin Biyue’s cultivation had been sealed during his time in the dungeon, so he could not train. Later on, when Elder Ning examined him, he determined cultivation-gone-wrong

was not the cause of the affliction, but he couldn't provide any coherent conclusion other than "that boy is emotionally repressed."

This wasn't a diagnosis the three believed. Especially when Yin Biyue's condition hadn't improved after taking medicine.

The issue could be either big or small. If only Yin Biyue's appearance was affected, there was no problem. But what if it really did pose a hidden threat to his cultivation path? If danger reared its head in the future, it would be much more difficult to resolve then.

Of course, if the Sword Sage returned, every problem would cease to be a problem. Unfortunately, no one knew where he was.

Jun Yu was silent.

Liu Qishuang spoke up first. "We have to resolve this somehow. If we really don't have any ideas, I can take Shidi to Xingshan Temple."

The best medical cultivators were at the Buddhist sects, the most renowned of which were Xingshan Temple and Jiekong Temple. Liu Qishuang's suggestion was a last resort. Although Xihua Peak and Jiekong Temple weren't at odds with each other, their relationship wasn't great either. And a journey to Xingshan Temple meant crossing huge deserts and snowfields.

Jun Yu shook his head. Though he didn't specify what they should do, his attitude was firm. Knowing he had arrived at a decision, the other two didn't say more. Ultimately, Xihua Peak's disciples had the weakest bonds among all those on the Cangya Mountains. Jun Yu and Liu Qishuang spoke few words as they were often immersed in their cultivation. Although Duan Chongxuan was talkative, he'd joined the sect late and felt too shy to

bother them. Furthermore, the third disciple Yan Xing rarely returned, and the Sword Sage hadn't returned for a long time himself.

However, when they had someone in common to protect, the tacit understanding borne of their peerage required few words. It felt right, and it warmed Duan Chongxuan's heart. It was as if he was closer than ever to his elder shixiong and second shijie, who usually felt out of reach.

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IF SECT LEADER Zhengyangzi knew what Duan Chongxuan was thinking, he'd slap his thigh in anger. *What in tarnation is "tacit understanding borne of peerage"? Protecting your own is such a Xihua Peak creed—like master, like disciples! Ugh!*

Zhengyangzi cast a glance at Luo Mingchuan, who was kneeling outside the hall, and sighed.

"It's getting chilly," he said to He Yanyun. "Tell your shixiong to come inside."

Luo Mingchuan walked in and knelt in front of Zhengyangzi. "Shifu."

Zhengyangzi had calmed down since the trial. Thinking back on it, he knew the disciple he had raised, and this was probably a case of Luo Mingchuan taking the blame on himself. When Zhengyangzi first conferred Luo Mingchuan the title of Cangya's chief disciple, the future sect leader, it was his sense of responsibility that Zhengyangzi had valued as much as his

talent in cultivation. A sect leader didn't have to have the highest level of cultivation, but he must have a sense of responsibility.

This excessive sense of responsibility seemed to have become Luo Mingchuan's burden. Zhengyangzi felt quite helpless to assist his disciple. Take the trial for example.

Zhengyangzi had told the public: *"Yin Biyue had no intention to cause harm to anyone. He was compelled to do so under the bewitchment of a demonic cultivator. Luo Mingchuan acted rashly to punish him, resulting in Yin Biyue's imprisonment before he could explain his circumstances. Both were at fault, and therefore both will be punished with house arrest."*

Had Zhengyangzi allowed the reason his disciple supplied to be publicized, it would have been an indelible stain on his reputation. Fortunately, with the presence of Jun Yu's sword, no one who'd been present in the hall would dare run their mouth.

The sword, Chunshan Xiao, was one Wei Jingfeng had left Jun Yu. The aging sect leader rubbed between his brows tiredly. If the sword were to be drawn, even he would jump to avoid its edge.

When is the sword-giver coming back to discipline his disciples? Could he have forgotten the existence of the Cangya Mountains in this world? Then, as if a memory had bitten him, Zhengyangzi thought, *Never mind. It's best that he doesn't return.*

Zhengyangzi helped his kneeling disciple to his feet.

"I will not force you to tell me the real cause behind your actions. I am simply angry that your execution lacked consideration. Have you thought what the consequences would be if I had allowed you to speak in front of all of Cangya? Not everything is your fault, nor does everything

require you to bear responsibility. Cangya is the weight on your shoulders. *Cangya* should be your primary concern."

He gazed at his disciple, who had grown taller than him, and sighed once more. "After all, in a hundred years, I will be passing Cangya to you."

Luo Mingchuan lowered his head. "This disciple is very sorry."

Zhengyangzi waved, dismissing him. "Never mind. You can decide how you wish to resolve this issue. Yanyun, you are dismissed too."

Young people had their own paths to walk. He was glad he would live long enough to watch over them for a part of their journey.

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RECENTLY, YIN BIYUE had been practicing the sword like a man-eating beast was hot on his heels. Worried the others would find something amiss about him, he stayed inside his little courtyard to train for the whole month.

The OG's sword techniques remained in his memories, but the sword refused to accept his vital qi. He could not utilize the extent of the sword's strength, rendering it no different from ordinary metal. This problem was as suffocating as a blade swinging by a thin wire over his head. Today, he was determined to find another way—or at the very least, a way to hide the issue!

Just then, a knock came from the front gates. The chatterbox's voice drifted in. "Sishixiong, I've come to visit you! Sishixiong!"

With his sword in hand, Yin Biyue went to open the door. Duan Chongxuan strode in waving his fan, then gave Yin Biyue a once-over.

“How have you been feeling these days, Shixiong? Do you feel unwell anywhere? Have you been taking your medicine on time?”

Oh, yeah. I’ve been taking meds every day. God forbid I miss a dose!

“I am fine. Don’t worry about me,” Yin Biyue said aloud, appearing unruffled. He only tolerated the medicine so his second shijie and the chatterbox wouldn’t worry. In truth, the Shamate hair color didn’t affect him at all, so he wasn’t stressed about it.

Duan Chongxuan stared at him like he was waiting for more. When Yin Biyue showed no signs of continuing, Duan Chongxuan rubbed his nose and attempted to start a new conversation.

“I see you’re practicing your sword. Sishixiong, your technique is exceptional. I had the honor of witnessing your craft when I first joined the sect, and it shook me to the core. Even now, I cannot forget…”

Please don’t ask me to demonstrate. I’ll give myself away in a heartbeat!

Yin Biyue shifted the subject slightly left. “When it comes to exceptional technique, who of Cangya can match Dashixiong?” *Have him demonstrate for you instead.*

That day in Qinghe Hall, Yin Biyue had been puzzled. Why was everyone, including the sect leader, so flustered? Wasn’t it strange for everyone to wear a *Don’t be rash, we can talk this out!* expression when Jun Yu demanded his sword?

When he saw the peachwood sword case, it came back to him. That sword was named Chunshan Xiao. To forge it, the Sword Sage had gathered

cosmic molten fire, meteoric sand, and laden iron from the West Sea. He then invited the master swordsmith Yan Qing to join him in reforging the ancient divine sword Linyuan into two new swords.

The endeavor had taken three years. The day the swords were completed, the Cangya Mountains were in the midst of spring. Finding the timing fortunate indeed, the Sword Sage laughed heartily and clapped.

So charming the green mountain is in my eyes;

Likewise I must appear in the green mountain's eyes.[18]

Thus, the longsword was named Chunshan Xiao—*smiling spring mountain*—and the shortsword Qiufeng Li—*the parting in autumn wind.* Jun Yu held Chunshan Xiao to guard Cangya, while the Sword Sage carried Qiufeng Li with him as he roamed the world. If one named the divine weapons of the world, these twin swords were at the top.

As soon as Yin Biyue spoke, Duan Chongxuan's eyes lit up. The words *Sishixiong, let's chat* were scrawled across his face.

Yin Biyue had no intention whatsoever to invite him inside for a cup of tea and conversation. Then a sudden blur flashed before him, and he had to suppress the urge to put a hand to his face.

Is your spatial storage used to carry tables, chairs, and stools just so you can chat with anyone anywhere? And *snacks and tea? What the hell?!*

Duan Chongxuan shut his fan with a snap and pointed at the stool now set on the ground. "Have a seat, Shixiong!"

Yin Biyue's mouth twitched. In one fluid motion, the chatterbox sat down and started pouring tea.

“Speaking of Dashixiong’s sword technique… Sishixiong, the sect leader versus Dashixiong. Who do you think would win?”

Bro, are you the head writer for the Cangya Mountains’ gossip tabloid?

Nonetheless, he considered the question seriously. “The sect leader is of the Great Ascension level.”

Despite holding a renowned sword, Jun Yu was only half a step toward the Great Ascension. In theory, the dominance of each cultivation level over the one beneath it was akin to a heavenly rift. But Yin Biyue didn’t have a deep understanding of this world’s level differences yet, so he didn’t want to speak rashly. All he knew was that the levels were so divided: Qi Cultivation, Marrow Purification, Spirit Concentration, Breakthrough, Small Ascension, Great Ascension, Second Sage, and the final stage, after transcending the heavenly tribulation, was Sagehood.

In this world, cultivators who had attained Small Ascension were already a rarity, their strength sufficient to establish their own sects. Those who reached Great Ascension were fewer still. As for the six Second Sages, they stood as titans whose influence shaped the fabric of the world. Each reigned over their own domain and seldom emerged.

And among them all, one Sage stood at the apex.

“But cultivation level isn’t the same as one’s combat strength,” Duan Chongxuan said. “Martial cultivators often exceed their cultivation level during battle, so it’s hard to judge. It’s true that Dashixiong is only halfway to Great Ascension, but…”

“But what?” Yin Biyue was interested now.

“Apparently, three years ago, when Dashixiong was out traveling, he encountered a sylvan grandmaster upon a desolate mountain in the Great Ascension level. The grandmaster coveted his sword, and a bloody battle ensued that lasted for five days. In the end, the grandmaster was forced to flee. He ran for three thousand miles, but Dashixiong chased after him, cleaving hills and boulders asunder until the old man was the one to fall.”

Yin Biyue quickly covered his surprise. To stand up to someone who had reached Great Ascension when he was only halfway there, and to back that opponent into a corner? What terrifying combat power.

“But you know how it is with rumors! Even the truthful parts are exaggerated,” Duan Chongxuan continued. “Dashixiong really is very strong, though. He had an unnamed sword at the time, not Chunshan Xiao, and even then he wielded that sort of power.” Sounding regretful, he added, “Truth be told, I’ve never seen Dashixiong use Chunshan Xiao. I have no idea what that sword looks like…”

As the golden sun sank in the western horizon, enveloping Cangya in the dimming colors of twilight for hundreds of miles, the faint cries of crows retiring to their nests floated in from the distance. In the blink of an eye, the pot of Bashan Sparrow’s Tongue tea had emptied.

Duan Chongxuan suddenly slapped the table. “Oh, that’s right! All this talk about Dashixiong reminds me—at the last meeting, he said we should get together when you’ve got the time. It’s getting late today. Why don’t we head over tomorrow?”

Have you only just remembered actual business now*?! Isn’t it late because you’ve been talking all this time?*

Resigned, Yin Biyue nodded. “Okay.”

After sending away the chatterbox, Yin Biyue stood alone in the yard. The waning sunlight stretched his shadow across the ground, and in the distance the fading sun gilded the rolling sea of clouds. The misty mountain was breathtaking to behold.

He lowered his head to gaze at the sword in his grip, his fingers subconsciously rubbing the hilt, as he thought back to the power emanating from the sword in Qinghe Hall.

Chapter 10

THE NEXT DAY, Yin Biyue couldn't make the meeting after all.

A greenfinch bearing a letter had landed outside his courtyard early in the morning. The letter was written in proper Taige script[19] using the deepwater ink of Hui Prefecture upon thin cloud paper. Even its wording was formal.

"The Lanyuan Academy invites Your Excellency for a visit. We eagerly await your arrival. Sincerely, Headmaster-xiansheng."[20]

Though exquisite, an invitation of such caliber could be composed by any prominent clan. The difference was the stamp at the end of the letter. It wasn't the academy's emblem of a brush entwined with a flower signifying literary excellence, but the stamp of the headmaster's personal seal.

Lanyuan Academy stood as a neutral power among the One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects, the Twin Buddhist Temples, and the Demonic Twelve Palaces. However, the academy's shadow influenced all of them. The current leader of Baopu Sect had once studied at the academy; the abbot of Jiekong Temple had once taught there. In fact, *many* of the pillars of major sects were former students of the school. Even a number of prominent officials in the court of the Northern Imperial Capital were graduates of Lanyuan Academy. But most importantly, the academy's headmaster was one of the six Second Sages of the world.

To have such a titan personally stamp an invitation was extraordinary indeed.

Duan Chongxuan clicked his tongue in amazement as he examined the letter. “Such spiritual ability, as expected of a Second Sage… Sishixiong, do you think the array cast in this letter can transport two people? Why don’t we bind ourselves as one and go together?”

Yin Biyue struggled to keep his mouth straight. *Are you stupid? No way. Taking a tagalong when teleporting? You’d be ripped apart in a heartbeat!*

He took the invitation back and studied its contents. Though the wording appeared polite, there was no indication of a meeting time. The meaning was clear: Depart immediately upon receipt.

One of the cultivation world’s crude sayings came to Yin Biyue’s mind: *The Cangya Mountains’ tyranny is the real deal—“I’ll beat you till you submit; I’m reason itself!” But Lanyuan Academy’s obstinance is just as real—their “pleases” and “thank-yous” are fists!*

Yin Biyue rubbed the palm-sized stamp with his thumb. The red ink was slightly raised, its texture smooth and delicate to the touch. The seal itself was generically engraved with the words *Personal Seal of Headmaster-xiansheng.*

Duan Chongxuan watched beside him, worried that he would disappear at any moment. The headmaster’s stamp contained an array that opened a spatial passageway upon injection of vital qi. Lanyuan Academy was located in Yunyang City of the Central Continent, while the Cangya Mountains were in the Western Continent. More than a thousand miles existed between them, but with the array, travel would be instantaneous.

Yin Biyue couldn’t think of why a titan like a Second Sage would want to see him. The inane reason Duan Chongxuan proposed—that the

headmaster would request he deliver a lecture at the academy because he had graduated with top marks—sounded impossible. In the three years he had studied at the academy, he hadn't even known where the headmaster lived. The deputy headmaster and the teachers had handled all academy affairs, whether big or small. Headmaster-xiansheng seemed like a legendary existence.

Well, no point in dwelling on things he didn't understand. He had to meet with the man regardless. He nodded curtly. "I'm off, Shidi."

Duan Chongxuan pressed close. "Sishixiong, you really won't consider bringing me along? Hey, Shixiong? Shixiong…?"

His cries were still echoing in Yin Biyue's ears when, in a flash, he found himself in a foreign land. Shallow puddles pooled around the blue tiles on the ground, and the air was cool and damp. The sky was clearing. Rain had just passed through Yunyang City.

Yin Biyue glanced down at his own shadow to determine the time difference between the two continents. He was standing within the vermilion gate of the academy. Before him was a gigantic establishment stone that resembled a spiritual lingzhi and exuded an air of magnificence. Beside the stone stood a red-robed young boy with hair tied in two loops. At the sight of Yin Biyue's appearance, he cupped his hands in a salute.

"Please come with me, Shixiong. Xiansheng is waiting for you."

Rather than a residence, the academy could be considered a city within a city—mainly because of its sheer size.

Circling past the establishment stone was the grand main avenue of the academy. It extended far into the distance, leading to the Hall of Diligence where the students gathered. The avenue and the main hall were

empty, as it was school hours and the students were in their respective classrooms. Beyond the Hall of Diligence, the path diverged into complex smaller routes. Some were winding corridors that wrapped around the academy's many buildings, while others were long, blue-tiled roads branching off in every direction.

Yin Biyue walked down the road that the OG had traversed countless times.

Massive black locust trees, their trunks as wide as three men, canopied the paths. Green vines sprawled across the walls of the four story library. Everywhere Yin Biyue looked, he saw vibrant green. The corridors connecting the classrooms were lined with weathered red pillars, their surfaces mottled, and the flecks of peeling paint revealed darker hues beneath. The breeze sweeping across the academy carried the refreshing fragrance of greenery and the sonorous voices of students reciting their texts. The scenery here was both familiar and foreign.

What did Lanyuan Academy teach? Everything. From calligraphy, painting, and mathematics, to prose, lyrics, and musical scores. Not to mention introduction to cultivation, hundreds of schools of thought, the beginning of the universe, and political mind games.

Headmaster-xiansheng once said: *"The pursuit of each Path has its sequence, but one does not hold superiority over another. Of the three thousand Paths in the universe, all lead to the same destination."* This was the guiding creed of the academy.

The boy led Yin Biyue through another archway and smiled. "It's been a few years since you've graduated, Shixiong. Do you still remember the way around here?"

“Of course. I walked these paths thousands of times. But even though I was a student here, I’m ashamed to admit, I do not know Xiansheng’s name.”

He assumed that the boy was the headmaster’s servant and could therefore supply him with the headmaster’s surname. That way, he could address the headmaster properly when they meet.

“No one really knows Xiansheng’s name,” the boy said. “I imagine he doesn’t remember it himself.”

Yin Biyue blinked in surprise. “Just as the world dares not speak the Sword Sage’s name, has Xiansheng really forgotten his own name with the passage of time?”

The boy puffed up his chubby cheeks and pursed his lips, looking conflicted. He seemed innocent and spirited. It was apparent the headmaster treated those around him with gentleness, at least on the surface.

“Not *exactly*,” the boy said. “Xiansheng is someone very senior, so everyone in the world, no matter how distinguished, has to address him that way. At the same time, he’s generous, so no matter how poor or lowly they are, he allows everyone to address him that way. Eventually, his name was no longer important. To Xiansheng, the common people are all equal.”

The common people were all equal? A faint smile surfaced on Yin Biyue’s face. Now, *those* sounded like the words of a true Sage. To him, they were mere ants beneath his feet. Each ant was equally small from his vantage point.

With an expression as calm as still water, he followed the boy to circle around the library and headed deeper into the quiet and secluded depths of the school. He was one step behind the boy, but when they

rounded a corner, the boy vanished. Yin Biyue continued his confident stride forward, however, and did not panic. This entire school was the headmaster's personal domain. Here, the movement of every petal and leaf, every bird and beast, was within his grasp. Nothing could escape his notice here—not even Yin Biyue losing his way.

He walked past the martial arts training hall, where young men practiced their sword with a singular focus. Though youthful in appearance, their eyes were resolute. Beads of sweat trickled down their foreheads and rolled down their collars.

He paused outside the Hall of Debate. Two groups of students inside were locked in a debate stalemate, their faces flushed red all the way down to their necks as they glared at each other.

He watched the students hurrying to and fro inside the library, their figures a blur through the windows. Their arms were stacked with books and scrolls and their strides steady and confident.

Ah, students in the prime of their youth.

He recalled two particular courses, Debate and Introduction to the Art of the Sword. Their teachers had been famously strict. When he first entered the school, others whispered, *"He's so young. Can he manage to graduate?"* Then they watched helplessly as he claimed the top spot in both courses. He had spent many nights studying, many mornings rising early to practice the sword, and many evenings climbing the high towers to watch the sun set.

Yin Biyue had never been the most gifted, but he had been more diligent than any prodigy.

Memories flooded his mind as scenes of the past flashed before his eyes. His life had felt like a long dream, within which he lived through three years of joy, anger, and sorrow at the academy. Every day spent in this establishment was engraved on his soul, from the first entrance exam he had nervously taken in the Hall of Learning, to the wanton singing and drinking of his farewell night upon Orchid Terrace.

The images stopped at the present, where he was Yin Biyue, and Yin Biyue was him.

The events of yesterday shaped the me of today.

The longsword resonated as the thought stirred in his mind. The blue-tiled floor beneath his feet split into a foot-long chasm of profound depth, standing stark against the backdrop of a sky dyed the color of blood by the fading sun.

At the same time, under the locust tree in a secluded yard, a middle-aged scholar in a tall hat and broad belt flashed a smile.

“Qi released before the sword unsheathed. Excellent.”

An entire of yard of locust flowers quivered in the breeze in response to his pleasure.

Yin Biyue had been immersed in the sword intent, a mystical feeling that was almost close to instinct, when the scenery before him changed into a yard full of locust trees. Though it was only mid-spring, the trees were in full bloom, their sweet fragrance wafting through the air. Standing beneath one of the locust trees was a singular figure—the master of the academy.

Before his meeting with Headmaster-xiansheng, Yin Biyue had imagined what kind of person he’d be many times. Most people would be curious about what those who stood at the apex of the world looked like or

what power they emanated. But what he'd pictured couldn't compare with what he witnessed now.

He had assumed the headmaster to be an otherworldly immortal elder. He certainly hadn't expected a middle-aged scholar. The man stood beneath the locust tree with his hands loosely clasped behind him like an idle rich man from a prominent house. Even when dressed in the formal attire of a tall hat and a broad belt, he seemed a little laid-back. He did not exude authority as the sect leader did, nor did he possess the glaring sword intent of Jun Yu or the cutting aura of a martial artist found on Liu Qishuang. Nonetheless, Yin Biyue didn't dare lower his guard. He had a keen intuition for sensing the strength of a soul, and the man before him was formidably strong. In all of Yin Biyue's experience assessing others, this man was a rare powerhouse.

Yin Biyue took two steps forward and stopped at a respectful distance before he bowed, maintaining a disciple's etiquette. "This student greets Xiansheng."

The idle rich man waved, indicating that formalities weren't necessary. What he said in the next second heightened Yin Biyue's alarm to the extreme. He felt his blood freeze, as if he'd plunged into an icy cellar.

The man sighed, a little rueful, then grinned.

"Don't worry about not being able to kill him."

Chapter 11

YIN BIYUE HAD TO SUMMON every ounce of willpower to keep his expression neutral. He dropped his head respectfully, like any pupil receiving guidance. He had to stay as placid as a lake. Even the smallest change that exposed his racing thoughts would not escape Xiansheng's eyes.

The "him" Xiansheng spoke of obviously meant Luo Mingchuan.

So, it had been Headmaster-xiansheng who'd ordered Yin Biyue to kill? Why did he want Luo Mingchuan dead? Hadn't Luo Mingchuan also studied at the academy? With his cultivation level, Xiansheng had a hundred ways to kill Luo Mingchuan; why use Yin Biyue? To compel a Second Sage to plot secretly, was the ultimate target Luo Mingchuan? Or was it…the Cangya sect? But the academy had been neutral for years, not to mention it had a strong friendship with Cangya. Furthermore, the Sword Sage and Xiansheng were good friends. Could it be that there was something unique about Luo Mingchuan? When was the order issued, after Yin Biyue first entered the academy or when he joined the Sword Sage? Did the Sword Sage know?

Yin Biyue felt like an insignificant pawn in the hands of titans. If this had happened to anyone else, they'd be seized by terror. But when Yin Biyue came to his senses, his mind was filled with practical questions.

Hey, what about my promised Final Boss arc? Why is there a stronger boss above me? Who put this giant mountain in the villain's camp? What do I do now?! As I suspected—leveling up is the only way to the top!

“We shall let this matter go for now. Do not trouble yourself with it in the future,” Xiansheng said. He pointed at the rattan chair beside him. “Come have a seat.”

At least Yin Biyue needn’t think about killing Luo Mingchuan for the time being. He politely took a seat. This segment of his memories was blank, but judging by the current situation, his past interactions with Xiansheng had been relatively peaceful.

Xiansheng sat down in one of the rattan chairs as well. A few locust blossoms had alighted upon the stone table before them, landing beside a slightly worn black-glazed tea set.

“You’ve come just in time to join me in stargazing.”

It had been early morning when Yin Biyue first arrived, but when he’d entered this mysterious realm, it was dusk. Now, the dregs of daylight were fading away. In about a cup of tea’s time, the first stars would be visible in the night sky.

Indeed, everything was within Xiansheng’s control.

First, water was brought to a boil, and the vessels were heated. Next, the tea cake was carefully broken apart, and the leaves sprinkled into the pot. Once the steaming water was added and the tea poured, Xiansheng swirled each cup. Waves of pristine, pale liquid swished against the glazed black walls of the vessels, their contrasting colors blending rather than clashing. Xiansheng moved with fluid, carefree grace, yet he was methodical and precise in his actions.

This was probably what Confucius meant by “Following one’s heart’s desires without overstepping the universe’s boundaries.”

Yin Biyue watched attentively. *How many people in the world would dare to imagine being served tea brewed by the headmaster? I got it for free, so I guess this is the benefit of working for a big shot,* he thought to himself with amusement.

Wordlessly, they sat beneath the locust tree, enjoying the taste of the tea. The situation wasn't developing as he had first expected; the residual reaction of the OG's body didn't raise his hackles against Xiansheng. Before Yin Biyue realized it, his agitated heart had calmed, and his distracting conjectures dispersed. For the first time since coming to this world, his taut nerves relaxed amid the fragrance of tea. He picked up his cup and swirled it in his hand. The faint shimmer of stars was reflected within.

Xiansheng closed his eyes in pleasure, finished his cup, then gazed upward to the sky. Thick clouds had drifted across the moon, obscuring its glow, which only served to heighten the brilliance of the stars.

"You must know, stars do not move as slowly as our eyes perceive," Xiansheng said with a twinkle in his eye. "Some are very fast."

Yin Biyue was taken aback. He glanced up again, only to see the same tapestry of silent stars. This was when he knew they were not seeing the same thing. He couldn't fathom how the world appeared through a Second Sage's eyes, any more than a mayfly knew the size of the world or a summer grub the chill of ice. In all that he'd lived through, he had never peered across billions of miles, to behold the universe and the orbit of stars.

Shifting to a more comfortable position in his chair, Xiansheng watched with great relish. Soon after, he once again shattered Yin Biyue's breadth of understanding.

“The Golden-Neck Dragon and Winged Fire Serpent were three Ganges Sand zhang[21] apart last year,” he said with a deep sigh. “They should be aligning about now.”

Golden-Neck Dragon and Winged Fire Serpent were constellation names, one in the east and one in the south. Ganges Sand was a unit of measurement in Buddhism, approximating ten to the power of fifty-two.

Squinting, Xiansheng murmured under his breath, his eyes fixed on the sky. Yin Biyue could just barely catch fragments of colossal numerical units like “jian,” “ji,” and “nayuta.”

As if connecting two dots together, Xiansheng lifted a finger and swept it across the sky.

A Sage’s divination! It wasn’t a matter of mystical perception of spiritual sense, but real calculations. Drawing from their immense reservoir of knowledge, their unique computational methods, and their terrifying capacity for reckoning, they would arrive at their outcome after dedicating an extended period to measurements and logic.

Yin Biyue was profoundly shaken. To learn fate through observation of the stars—what did Xiansheng see?

The man in question set down his tea cup and smiled faintly. “It is time for you to leave Cangya. Southward is best.”

The pot of tea was done.

The night breeze picked up, stirring the faint sweetness of the lingering tea fragrance and locust blossoms in the air as it dispersed the thick clouds in the sky. The bright moon emerged, breaking free of its cover. Silvery white light beamed down and spilled across the mortal earth

from the distant heavens. At the same time, the brilliant stars dimmed. There were a few so small in size that Yin Biyue could no longer see them.

As the shimmering stars faded when the moon rose, so did the smile on Xiansheng's face retreat behind the thin folds around his eyes. He began to clean up the tea set. Tonight's stargazing session had come to an end. Yin Biyue rose to his feet and dusted away the locust petals gathered on his robes. He cupped his hands in a salute, performing a disciple's courtesy one more time as farewell.

Leaning against his rattan chair, Xiansheng nodded. Yin Biyue fished out the invitation from his sleeves and activated the array. His form rippled like water before vanishing from the small yard, leaving a sole figure behind.

Even with the radiant moon as company, he seemed somewhat lonely. The scholar gazed back at the solitary night sky. "You must know," he murmured to himself, his expression shrouded, "the moon is also a star."

Except this star was too bright, and none dared to challenge its radiance.

A sigh seemed to echo through the empty halls of the academy.

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YIN BIYUE LANDED back in his own courtyard on Xihua Peak, the same spot he had left that morning. The invitation in his hand crumbled into dust and dissipated into the night.

The academy one-day travel pass really is single use, he thought, looking down at his hand ruefully. *Here I thought I might have a spiritual device that allowed me to travel to the academy at will. Who knows when I'll reach that cultivation level.*

To fabricate a device that allowed others to traverse a space of countless miles was no small feat.

Yin Biyue didn't notice that what he'd wondered was *when* he would attain the state of Second Sage, not if he could attain it. Among a hundred cultivators in the Spirit Concentration state, maybe forty of them would think about how to attain the Breakthrough state. Twenty of them would think about when they would attain Small Ascension, and of them, five would try to picture what Great Ascension was like. But almost no one would attempt to contemplate the cultivation of a Sage.

He didn't dwell on any of that. The present him believed it was enough to train diligently. There was no need to ask questions. It was a subconscious confidence he possessed. He wouldn't waste his time on self-doubt or erode his resolve with unnecessary rumination.

He gripped the hilt of his sword and lifted his gaze to the sky. Without the cover of Yunyang City's towering structures, the moon above the Cangya Mountains seemed even brighter and clearer. He could hear the rustling leaves of the sea of deciduous trees mingling with the murmurs of the rolling waves of conifers. Every now and then, the cry of a partridge would break through the stillness, deepening the emptiness that enveloped the night.

He couldn't unleash the sharp sword intent that boiled within his sheathed sword the way he had during the day at the academy. That was a

stroke of luck—a fleeting feeling his mind attained. Still, it greatly inspired him.

He stood in the yard through the night. By the time dawn broke, morning dew had soaked him entirely. Yet his eyes shone brighter and brighter.

He had found the way to wield his sword.

Chapter 12

ALTHOUGH YIN BIYUE hadn't slept, he was energetic at the meeting the next day. He stood straight and steadfast, with vivid, lucid eyes.

Liu Qishuang was glad to see him in such good health. "It seems Shidi is feeling better."

"Thank you for your care, Shijie," Yin Biyue said with a nod. He next turned to Jun Yu and Duan Chongxuan. "Thank you, Dashixiong, Wushidi."

His gratitude was for the dungeon visit and the protection they gave during the public trial. Although Liu Qishuang and Duan Chongxuan's assistance had spiraled in the wrong direction, it had worked out.

Seeing the earnest look in Yin Biyue's eyes, Li Qishuang felt a twinge of guilt. She hadn't done her duty as a shijie in the past, and she hadn't been much help this time either. In spite of this, even after all the hurt, Yin Biyue still thanked them. He truly had an excellent temperament.

The meeting took place in Jun Yu's First Courtyard, with the tables, chairs, and benches provided by Duan Chongxuan as usual. After extending his gratitude to his peers, Yin Biyue turned his eyes on Jun Yu, knowing that his elder shixiong must have something to say.

Jun Yu exuded a frigid aura as he sat with his back as straight as a brush, as if he might unsheathe his sword at a moment's notice. Gazing at his two shidi, he said, "In three months, Mount Chongming's Flower-Plucking Tournament will occur. You two shall go."

His voice sounded raw and stiff, probably because he didn't speak often.

“The Thousand-Leaf Lotus of Ming Lake is known to dispel worries and troubles of the heart,” Liu Qishuang added. “It has also come time for the two of you to travel beyond the peak.”

Yin Biyue abruptly recalled Headmaster-xiansheng telling him to travel south. Mount Chongming was in the Southern Continent. This was fast.

The flower to be plucked in the Flower-Plucking Tournament was the Thousand-Leaf Lotus in Ming Lake of Mount Chongming. Over a hundred hectares of the lake’s surface were canopied by lotus leaves, but there was only one lotus flower that bloomed every ten years. In a cultivator’s long lifespan, ten years wasn’t much, but no one wanted to wait.

Because the Thousand-Leaf Lotus drew on the natural spiritual energy abundant on Mount Chongming, in addition to dispelling troubles of the mind and heart, it could also purify the physical constitution and improve cultivation aptitude, laying a solid foundation for an individual’s cultivation path. To cultivators of the Small Ascension level and below, there was no better treasure.

The strongest would speak with their strength, climbing to the summit and plucking the flower. This was how Mount Chongming’s Flower-Plucking Tournament gained its name.

After consultation between the various sects, in order to encourage the younger generation, it had been decided that anyone below the state of Small Ascension and above the state of Breakthrough could participate. Once one was past the Small Ascension state, the flower was of little value, and those below the state of Breakthrough could not fully absorb the flower’s spiritual energy.

Alternately hosted by the One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects and the Twin Buddhist Temples, the tournament had developed into a massive competition where the young measured their strength. Countless astounding talents traveled thousands of miles to attend this event—not only for the Thousand-Leaf Lotus, but also to make a name for themselves. The tournament was also an opportunity for the major sects to boost their prestige, affirm their status, and test each other.

Cangya attended the tournament every time, though Xihua Peak had never participated. Jun Yu had made the decision to attend in this instance because of Yin Biyue's "white-hair affliction." Liu Qishuang also thought that participation at the Flower-Plucking Tournament of Mount Chongming was an excellent choice, whether they found a cure or gained experience through their travels.

None of the Sword Sage's older disciples—Jun Yu, Liu Qishuang, and Yan Xing—had attended this grand competition organized specifically for young talents. That might have sounded rather unbelievable, but the reasons were simple.

Jun Yu was the Sword Sage's chief disciple, but the Flower-Plucking Tournament hadn't existed when he first made a name for himself. Later, when he emerged from the peak to travel the world, he'd already attained the Small Ascension state. Not to mention, he only traveled to the most dangerous and remote places, like the Mighty Mountains, savage swamps, or the snow plains of the Northwest. Very few people had actually seen him during his journey.

Liu Qishuang had originally intended to go to Mount Chongming, not to pluck any flowers, but to seek a worthy opponent to sharpen her skills. However, the year she emerged from the peak, she'd run into the revival of

Qiong Palace—of the Twelve Palaces of the Demonic Dominion. Thus, she joined the sect leader and many of the sect elders and charged up the Xiling Mountains to vanquish evil. Many of those at the Small Ascension state perished in the battle, yet Liu Qishuang, who was at the Spirit Concentration state at the time, managed to survive. She missed the Flower-Plucking Tournament, but she found her match in the battle with the demonic cultivators and therefore had no regrets.

As for the year Yan Xing emerged from the mountain, *he'd* made the trip to Mount Chongming. He tried a few of the pre-challenges, but none at the scene were a match for him. Finding it dull, he galloped away with his changdao brandished, never to be seen again.

In spite of all these tales, whether it was Jun Yu's "Cross-Level Kills," Liu Qishuang's "Battle of Xiling Mountains," or Yan Xing's "Overnight Breakthrough," most had only heard of them rather than witnessed them with their own eyes. This time, should Yin Biyue and Duan Chongming participate, they would not only be representing Cangya. They would be representing Xihua Peak—the Sword Sage's disciples.

This would be the first formal appearance of his disciples in the world in a century. Unlike what was written in the records, unlike the exaggerated tales recited by storytellers, and unlike the fanciful speculation of countless cultivators, this would be head-on combat with similar young prodigies, racing down a narrow path to determine who was superior. Yin Biyue felt heavy when he thought of this. He understood that victory or defeat was no longer his own—he carried the name of his unearned master.

However, Liu Qishuang had her mind on things beyond the competition. She believed that now was the perfect time for Yin Biyue to travel. Sparring with others would broaden his horizons, show him how big

the world was, and get him out of his narrow box. Perhaps the experience would lessen the impact of the incident with Luo Mingchuan.

Yin Biyue's innocent nature could be attributed to the uncomplicated environment of his upbringing. He had either studied behind the closed doors of the academy or trained in seclusion on the peak. The outside world might be tempestuous, but one could only grow from seeing the wickedness of the human heart firsthand. Her shidi needed to grow.

Liu Qishuang smiled faintly at Yin Biyue. "Young people should have a sharp spirit."

Yin Biyue forced himself not to grimace. If he were to add up all the years he'd spent in other transmigrations, that line would've turned into: *Old freaks should have a sharp spirit.*

Assuming he understood why Yin Biyue had hesitated, Jun Yu said in encouragement, "Of the participants this year, only the one with the sobriquet 'Tempest Sword' has some considerable skill. The others are of no concern. Fight your best. No one can win against you."

Da-Shining-Xiong, where's this confidence in me beaming from?! I'm not you! I'm only in late-stage Spirit Concentration! Yin Biyue thought, baffled.

The so-called "Tempest Sword" was a man named Zhong Shan who was acclaimed throughout the Southern Continent. He had attained Breakthrough at the age of twenty and was hailed as the best below Small Ascension. He was the genius deemed by the Qinglu Sword Sect as the most likely to attain Sagehood in the next three hundred years. But to Jun Yu, all he earned was "some considerable skill." If the Qinglu Sword Sect

found out about this, they might slit their own throats en masse in a fit of pique.

Yin Biyue was still immensely grateful, of course—because his elder shixiong had said so many words in one go just to encourage him! Yin Biyue cast a glance to the side, and sure enough, Duan Chongxuan's eyes were practically on fire. His excited face exuded an energy that screamed *Dashixiong, say a few more words!*

Yin Biyue groaned in his head, but he was mindful to keep his words serious. "Dashixiong, Ershijie, please rest assured that I will do my utmost not to disgrace Xihua Peak's reputation at this tournament. And I will look after Wushidi!"

Liu Qishuang looked astounded by his promise. Even Jun Yu was slightly taken aback.

Yin Biyue was confused. *What, did I say anything wrong? The first half was correct! The second half… I'm Duan Chongxuan's shixiong and my cultivation is higher. It's my job to look after him?*

Duan Chatterbox saluted him with cupped hands. "Then I will be under your care, Shixiong."

Yin Biyue's confusion only deepened. Duan Chongxuan was about to tease him for the look on his face when Jun Yu's own turned grim.

"Luo Mingchuan has come."

Jun Yu controlled Xihua Peak's barrier. If he claimed that Luo Mingchuan was there, the latter must have been at the foot of the mountain. The atmosphere turned heavy.

"What's he doing here?" Liu Qishuang asked with a frown.

Duan Chongxuan stole a glimpse at Yin Biyue for his reaction. “Maybe…he’s here to see Sishixiong?”

Jun Yu was ready to deal a strike with his sword qi if Luo Mingchuan dared take another step closer. But to everyone’s surprise, Yin Biyue nodded.

“I shall meet with him,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Shixiong, Shijie, do you have anything else you wish to discuss?”

Yin Biyue didn’t understand why everyone’s face dropped at his response. What kind of villain wouldn’t face the protagonist?

I have to go. “Know thy enemy” is always the way to assess the protagonist’s limits, so I learn how to push his buttons and get my ass kicked every time!

Liu Qishuang appeared grim and Duan Chongxuan looked to be biting his tongue. In the end, Jun Yu made the decision for everyone. “We shall go together.”

Thus, the disciples of Xihua Peak descended the mountain with as much pomp and fanfare as four people could manage. Luo Mingchuan was alone. They overpowered him with numbers. Jun Yu was halfway to reaching Great Ascension, while Liu Qishuang was at Small Ascension. Luo Mingchuan was only at the Breakthrough stage. They overpowered him in cultivation level too.

Yin Biyue finally figured it out: His peers had come with him as backup because they were *worried* about him! Unfortunately, there was a universal truth even more consistent than Newton’s three laws: Those who back villains never reach a good end. He really needed to talk his innocent peers out of their decision.

When he caught sight of Luo Mingchuan, however, he found himself at a loss for words.

The man before Yin Biyue was handsome and gentle as always. However, despite the vernal breeze of late spring blowing past him, he appeared emaciated by the withered desolation of autumn. His eyes were sunken and shadow-smeared, and his white Daoist robes flapped hollowly in the wind.

They'd only been apart for a month, yet Luo Mingchuan had turned haggard—a world of difference from when they first met, when he was full of spirit and vigor.

As he sensed the approaching party, he looked at Yin Biyue. His eyes were dull and his voice slightly hoarse. "Yin-shidi."

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LUO MINGCHUAN THOUGHT he had sorted himself out. Somehow, when he saw Yin Biyue before him, he found himself at a loss for words.

As the chief disciple of the Cangya Mountains, Luo Mingchuan handled the affairs of the sect on his master's behalf. He was the one who processed all the jade slips the other peaks transmitted to Qinghe Hall before reporting the important matters to his master. This morning, he'd seen the jade slip Jun Yu had sent informing Qinghe Hall that two disciples of Xihua Peak would be attending the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Only two disciples of Xihua Peak were below the Small Ascension state. Yin Biyue was one of them.

The mere thought of how he'd looked in the dungeon made Luo Mingchuan's chest clench.

"Shifu, I will go to the Flower-Plucking Tournament on Mount Chongming."

"You were supposed to go anyway. Why are you kneeling?!"

"I want to travel with Yin-shidi."

Zhengyangzi fell silent, the empty main hall echoing only with the drip-drop of the water clock. It was a long while before he waved his hand.

"Go on, then."

Luo Mingchuan performed a proper kowtow.

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JUN YU AND LIU QISHUANG showed no signs of speaking, so Duan Chongxuan took a step forward.

"What can we do for you, Luo-shixiong?" He was courteous and polite. No one could fault him for a lack of etiquette. Yin Biyue thought the critical role of Xihua Peak's diplomatic rep would suit Duan Chongxuan perfectly.

"I came because I wish to go to the Flower-Plucking Tournament alongside Yin-shidi," Luo Mingchuan said, his eyes trained on Yin Biyue.

Luo Mingchuan was a well-spoken man. He'd once spoken eloquently at the Realms Symposium and had used his words to rally the

hearts of the others during their plight in the secret realm. But right now, every word he uttered was strained.

“Not possible.” Liu Qishuang rejected him coldly.

Luo Mingchuan paled, but he didn’t know what to say to advance his cause. Instead, he slashed his finger with his spiritual powers. Scarlet beads of blood trickled from the cut and dripped onto the ground.

He spoke again with careful emphasis. “I, Luo Mingchuan, swear before you now that I will obtain the Thousand-Leaf Lotus of Ming Lake for Shidi, or else I will never advance in my cultivation!”

A heartblood oath. Very few would make such a vow. Forcing out one’s heartblood was an enormous drain on a cultivator, never mind the consequences of breaking the oath. This was an oath that demanded absolute action at an immense cost.

The color of Liu Qishuang’s face changed drastically, and even Jun Yu’s hardened expression cracked an inch.

Duan Chongxuan snapped his fan shut and narrowed his eyes. “Luo-shixiong, those aren’t words to be uttered carelessly.”

Luo Mingchuan’s lips had lost all color at this point. He stared pointedly at Yin Biyue, a glimmer of hope shining through the cloud of despair and anguish. “Shidi, do you trust me?”

Everyone turned their head to Yin Biyue and saw, with astonishment, that he nodded.

Chapter 13

A SEMBLANCE OF WARMTH entered the air, melting Luo Mingchuan's surprise and disbelief into a smile at last. No smile had graced his lips ever since he had parted with Yin Biyue at the dungeon, and now that it was blooming anew, the upward curve was a bit stiff and silly in a way he didn't realize.

"Thank you, Shidi. I-I will definitely do as I have vowed," Luo Mingchuan said, flustered by Yin Biyue's unexpected response.

"Sishidi, are you certain?" Liu Qishuang asked Yin Biyue.

"Rest assured, Shijie. I know what I'm doing."

Jun Yu said nothing but frowned, while Duan Chongxuan grinned like he had a secret.

Meanwhile, Yin Biyue wasn't as calm as he appeared. For some reason, the tech intern's voice echoed in his ears: *"These days, eight out of ten protagonists become villains for vengeance, and the ninth becomes a yandere that's totally beyond help. A sincere, righteous protagonist from a proper background is even rarer than a three-legged toad, I'm telling you!"*

What a time to remember the intern's words! *If this bleeding-heart protagonist's brain is that confused, then I'd rather have a villainized one who's beyond hope. At least the plot would make sense! Is exchange included in the package? Is it?!*

He couldn't comprehend Luo Mingchuan, but there was no reason to decline the protagonist's invitation. Besides, he was worried half to death

about his villain-supporting peers. How could he unlock the “Prevent Your Peers from Confronting the Protag” achievement?

When Luo Mingchuan broke into a smile, Yin Biyue was struck by an epiphany.

Okay, that was the script: *The protagonist gave his everything to the heartless villain. They were BFFs in the first half, and the villain backstabbed the protagonist in the second half.*

What a hecking twisted plot—city folks knew how to play!

Coming to this realization, Yin Biyue relaxed and felt immensely assured. The plotline was still within his grasp. His relief softened his dourness toward Luo Mingchuan, and his eyes twinkled with mischief.

“Does Luo-shixiong have anything else to discuss?” he asked.

Luo Mingchuan thought he saw the eternal snow upon Chenyun Ridge melt into a gurgling spring that flowed into his heart.

“No, nothing else. Rest well, Shidi. I will take my leave now,” he said, though for some reason he didn’t move. It wasn’t until Duan Chongxuan cleared his throat that he turned around and left.

The remaining four hung around to discuss travel plans for a bit until Yin Biyue also left.

Turning to Duan Chongxuan, Liu Qishuang crossed her arms. “Keep an eye on Yin-shidi. Don’t let him be deceived. Although anyone with eyes can see Luo Mingchuan is deeply in love with Shidi, he tried to force himself on him, after all. We can’t just hand Shidi over to him.”

Duan Chongxuan turned serious at once, his usual frivolity gone. “Of course, Shijie. That goes without saying.”

Liu Qishuang couldn’t relax when Yin Biyue told her not to worry, but when Duan Chongxuan said it, she knew Luo Mingchuan wouldn’t be able to get his way so easily. Jun Yu didn’t say anything, but he had the same opinion. Thus, the matter was settled.

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SINCE HIS TRIP to the academy, Yin Biyue had found a way to practice his sword, and he’d been training day and night without daring to slack for a second. He felt he could see the outlines of the threshold for the Breakthrough state. If only the minutes would slow down so he could improve his proficiency and further cement his cultivation level. Yet a month passed in the blink of an eye, and the time had come for him to depart.

The day before his departure, he decided to pay a visit to Jun Yu and Liu Qishuang to bid them farewell.

Jun Yu was not in the First Courtyard. Guided by the presence of his majestic sword qi, Yin Biyue came to the precipice behind the residence, where Jun Yu was practicing the sword—using a freshly snapped, withered branch. When Yin Biyue was about a hundred feet away, he could tell Jun Yu was in the zone, immersed in the sword intent, so he stopped in his tracks to avoid disturbing him.

In the next second, an enormous pressure—as monumental as a mountain—bore down on Yin Biyue with suffocating strength. He

summoned his vital qi to ward off the sword qi, and simultaneously concentrated on Jun Yu to observe his movements.

Jun Yu was practicing a sword style, “Chongshan Minor,” that had been created by the Sword Sage. He stood at the edge of the peak, beholding the boundless green mountains and borrowing their momentum. It was similar to Yin Biyue practicing beside the cold pool and drawing water to refine the momentum of his own sword, Yihu.

The state of mind, the method of cultivation, the sword technique, and the force behind it resonated with the universe to allow the wielder to move at will, as if guided in perfect harmony with the cosmos.

The morning breeze swept away the drifting mist below the cliff, allowing the rays of the sun to gild the distant mountains. Millions of intertwining threads of gold gathered upon Jun Yu’s withered branch to form a river that surged forward, splitting mountains and rocks to rush through the meadows and hills for ten thousand miles, until it at last merged without a sound into the great sea.

Jun Yu withdrew his makeshift sword and stopped. Still standing at the precipice, his black robes and hair dancing in the wind, he nodded at Yin Biyue. There hadn’t been any golden rays or rivers, nor were there any meadows or hills or seas. All that stood in reality were the boundless green mountains, resilient and silent. All he saw was but an image conjured by the sword intent.

Yin Biyue returned to his senses. He approached and bowed. “Forgive me for the disturbance, Shixiong.”

To his surprise, Jun Yu addressed him directly. “How was it?”

Yin Biyue paused before he realized Jun Yu was asking him what he thought of the sword style. He considered his answer.

“You drew great momentum from the mountain using the Chongshan Minor technique. The sword brimmed with the mountain’s power, yet it did not overflow. You manipulated it easily and at will. I imagine the true meaning contained within is already clear to you, Shixiong.”

It wasn’t obsequious praise; Jun Yu’s sword was superb. Even with a withered branch and without his vital qi, the sword qi itself was enough to communicate the danger it could pose to Yin Biyue. This was the gap in their cultivation level—the gap in their art of the sword.

However, Jun Yu shook his head. “Every day, I swing the sword sixty-three thousand times. Yet I have not progressed in three years.”

Yin Biyue realize Jun Yu was talking to him about training. It made sense; they were the only two on Xihua Peak who practiced the sword—though the gap between their skill levels was significant. Jun Yu must have thought highly of him to express his self-doubt.

The minor flaw in the sword of a cultivator halfway to Great Ascension was not going to be detected by a cultivator in the Spirit Concentration state. However, Yin Biyue had his lived experience to draw from. Moreover, he already suspected the cause of Jun Yu’s bottleneck. After Duan Chongxuan said that their shixiong hadn’t used Chunshan Xiao in his fight against a Great Ascension cultivator, Yin Biyue had been thinking about it.

Now that the opportunity presented itself, he voiced his question bluntly. “Why do you not use Chunshan Xiao when you practice, Dashixiong?”

“I have not yet attained Great Ascension. I am unworthy of wielding it,” Jun Yu replied without hesitation.

Yin Biyue knew for certain what the problem was now.

His peers had protected him on several occasions, yet he hadn’t had the chance to repay them. Now, even though he knew what he was about to say risked overstepping, he decided to speak his mind.

He met Jun Yu’s eyes firmly. “My cultivation level is low, but I personally believe a sword is a sword. Flowers, branches, and grass are not swords. Axes, hooks, and pronged spears are not swords. Therefore, it is only sword practice when one is holding a sword.”

Jun Yu furrowed his brows.

“What is the meaning of a sword if it cannot be wielded?” Yin Biyue continued. “To be stored inside and hung on a wall as a decoration?”

When Jun Yu remained silent, Yin Biyue decided to push his luck. “The way I see it, Chunshan Xiao is no doubt an excellent sword. But if it is kept inside a case, it is not a divine weapon, but a shackle—it’s holding you back!”

His words struck Jun Yu’s heart like a sword itself, hard enough to break him out of his fog. Jun Yu’s eyes flashed, and a sharp whirlwind of stunning sword qi burst out of him. Yin Biyue’s stomach churned even though he pushed his vital qi to the limit to shield himself. Only a moment later, however, Jun Yu’s riotous energy quieted to the stillness of a calm sea.

“Dashixiong, have you ever considered that Shifu gave you the sword because no one else in this world was worthy to wield it except for you?”

Jun Yu brushed his sleeves gently, as if he had dusted away an imperceptible grain of dust, and the confusion that had oppressed him for

years was dispelled along with it.

“Thank you, Shidi,” he said with great solemnity.

Yin Biyue lowered his head. “Do not mention it.” When Jun Yu saluted him nonetheless, he frantically turned to avoid the bow.

Still dazed from his enlightenment, Jun Yu turned to watch the mountains in the distance. Yin Biyue bade him farewell and left to descend through the forest alone. He knew Jun Yu had just broken through the obstacle in his mind and needed to be left alone to collect his thoughts.

Yin Biyue had perceived Jun Yu’s hurdle not because he was more of an expert, but because those too close to a problem often couldn’t see it clearly. Moreover, everyone believed Jun Yu to be strong, and none would imagine him *stuck*. Even when Duan Chongxuan spoke of Jun Yu fighting without Chunshan Xiao, his praise was full of awe.

Jun Yu was strong indeed, but the burden on his shoulders was too heavy: the burden of his reputation as the Sword Sage’s chief disciple; the burden of an elder shixiong’s duty; and, heaviest of all, the burden that Xihua Peak and the rest of the Cangya Sect were the bastion of peace in the realm. His responsibilities did not stop at wielding Chunshan Xiao.

The world was not as peaceful as it seemed. The Sword Sage had been gone for a long time, and malicious tongues were spreading the rumor that the Sword Sage was no longer in this world. The Cangya Mountains did not have a Second Sage. If the Sword Sage was one day truly gone, Cangya’s strongest fighter, Jun Yu, might have to face multiple Second Sages.

Yin Biyue’s heart grew heavy at this thought. If he knew this, many others must as well, whether they be in the light or the shadows. In fact,

some might have already divined a multitude of possibilities—some like Headmaster-xiansheng.

Chapter 14

YIN BIYUE'S HEAVY HEART did not last.

"Shidi, bring this dragon-scale-armored robe! And this South Sea mountain-submerging dagger! And the purple-bamboo bone-jade fan, the cover for the Nine-Dragon Divine Bell, and the realms cauldron! Take them all…"

While Liu Qishuang pondered what else might be missing, the corner of Yin Biyue's mouth wavered as he stared at the small mountain of spiritual weapons. He hadn't been able to get a word in since he arrived. Liu Qishuang practiced the art of the fist and disregarded material possessions in her training. The majority of these weapons had been the spoils from the Battle of Xiling Mountains. If that was the case, he couldn't possibly accept them.

Clearing his throat softly, he interrupted her. "Shijie, I understand your goodwill. But I am a sword cultivator. Would I not be neglecting my fundamentals if I traveled with so many spiritual weapons?"

Liu Qishuang thought that made sense—she didn't usually use these things herself. Still, she was worried! "Shidi, at least bring one for self-protection."

In the end, the two came to a compromise, and Yin Biyue took a dagger.

After calming down, Liu Qishuang felt like she'd been possessed. A journey was filled with unpredictable dangers. How could any preparation

be perfect? How could any contingencies be foolproof? Her overthinking could end up harming her shidi instead.

The road ahead might look long and unpredictable, but Shidi had to be the one to walk it alone. Liu Qishuang relaxed, offered him some words of encouragement, and let him go.

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LUO MINGCHUAN sat upright and poised at a desk, reading. His gaze was quiet and profound like the immeasurable depths of the ocean. It wasn't a scroll of jade slips he was perusing, but an old book with yellowed corners. Even though it was no precious tome, he remained diligent. His self-discipline and sense of responsibility was rooted in his character, down to his bones. Even when he was alone, his comportment was immaculate.

Sometimes, even Zhengyangzi found it a little much.

However, his manners were not snobbish. On the contrary, anyone who came in contact with him felt at ease; interacting with him was as comfortable as an evening breeze. His smile carried the right amount of warmth, without being overly broad or faint. No matter whom he was speaking with, or what about, he always maintained a respectful distance, neither too close nor too far. His house was like his person, neither too extravagant nor too simple. His furnishings were conventionally arranged. The osmanthus-ice incense burning inside his lotus-patterned nephrite incense burner induced mental clarity and a contemplative, tranquil mind. The sweet, refreshing fragrance swirled in the room, and faint trails of

smoke lingered upon Luo Mingchuan’s brow. He sat at the desk like a towering, rugged pine that stood steadfast at the edge of a harrowing cliff.

Only he knew his outward calm was a facade.

The incense had been a gift from an old friend of the Qinglu Sword Sect who once visited Cangya. He had never used it before—there’d been no need. Yet when the heart was agitated, how could mere osmanthus-ice incense steady it? Thus, when someone stirred the barrier cast at his front gates, he set down his book and went outside.

The visitor was He Yanyun. Unlike her usual bubbly self, her face was lined with concern. Luo Mingchuan welcomed her into his courtyard but not inside. Although cultivators did not emphasize the gap between men and women, he had always adhered to propriety.

He Yanyun spoke up the moment she took a seat at the stone bench beneath the tree. “Shixiong, are you really not coming with us?”

“I will be going with Yin-shidi and Duan-shidi of Xihua Peak. Their chosen route is different. It diverges a bit and requires us to depart a month in advance,” Luo Mingchuan replied. “Cheng-shishu of Xiping Peak will be leading the team for this year’s Flower-Plucking Tournament. Listen to his arrangements.”

The registration for the Flower-Plucking Tournament was voluntary without any restriction on the number of registrants. Only thirty disciples from Cangya were participating because there weren’t many in the Spirit Concentration and Breakthrough states. Furthermore, not everyone at Cangya was eager for fame. There were others whose states weren’t yet solidified and who preferred to continue their training in seclusion, knowing they were unlikely to pluck the lotus this time around. Nonetheless,

compared to sects of less renown that couldn't even gather twenty disciples in the Breakthrough state, Cangya's number was a terrifying prospect.

He Yanyun wasn't surprised by Luo Mingchuan's answer, as she had learned of his decision prior to coming. She twisted her sleeves, but plucked up her courage and asked the question on her mind despite her anxiety.

"Shixiong, did you really do something wrong to Yin-shixiong?"

In her experience, Luo-shixiong was never wrong. If he seemed to have made a mistake, it was someone else's fault. This was a blind belief akin to faith. This was why, though she knew Luo Mingchuan never lied—and had felt bad for Yin Biyue during the public trial—she asked the question again now, still hopeful.

Luo Mingchuan fell silent. The wind swept around his expansive sleeves, surrounding him with autumn's chill. It was a long time before he finally said, "I have wronged him."

He Yanyun's eyes watered. She bit her lip, unable to find her voice. Then, without even a salute, she leaped to her feet and ran out of the courtyard.

She ran all the way to Xiqian Peak's Lucent Lake so filled with despair that she couldn't breathe. However, when she saw her sorry face and her eyes full of unshed tears reflected in the water, she began to slowly calm. She had remembered a truth her master once told her when she was a little girl.

Gazing at the lake, he had said, "*The petty man errs not. The gentleman errs always.*"

Petty people would never believe themselves at fault, whereas the noble reflected on themselves to recognize and rectify their faults.

She recalled how at the time, she had argued with her master. “Maybe it’s because people are too hard on the gentleman, so they amplify a tiny mistake into a huge one. And because the petty man is petty, people don’t really blame them when they mess up. How unfair. It’s awful to be a gentleman! Lucky that I’m a girl!”

Zhengyangzi had glared at her, his beard bristling. “Unteachable child! Your shixiong is much better than you!”

Of course her shixiong was better. In her heart, her shixiong was better than anyone.

She cupped water from the lake and washed her face, then smiled. She felt that Luo Mingchuan, who would admit his wrongs, was more worthy of admiration than anyone who didn’t.

The evening breeze calmed her mind. As she sat at the bank, she thought back to the two men at the public trial, scrutinizing her memory of every movement, every word, and every expression. She also considered Luo Mingchuan’s recent haggardness and weight loss. Finally, she came to a decision.

He Yanyun stood up and clenched her fist, a lofty feeling surging in her chest. She declared, “Shixiong, it’s my turn to help you! Don’t you worry!”

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THE FIFTH DAY of the fourth month was an auspicious day on the calendar. It was suitable for travel, for funerals, for weddings, for breaking

ground—essentially, it was suitable for everything. Duan Chongxuan had checked the calendar before deciding on their departure date.

Liu Qishuang and Jun Yu sent their two shidi out of Xihua Peak. When it came time to say goodbye, the pair found they had nothing left to say.

Yin Biyue had noticed Jun Yu's aura could no longer be so easily restrained. Just standing close to him felt like standing in the shadow of a massive mountain. It was a good thing. Maybe by the time Yin Biyue returned, his elder shixiong would have attained Great Ascension.

After bidding farewell with a bow, Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan descended the mountain, only to encounter Luo Mingchuan waiting for them halfway. He seemed in better health than when they last saw him.

"Yin-shidi, Duan-shidi," he said with a slight nod.

"A long journey is ahead of us, Luo-shixiong. We'll be in your care," Duan Chongxuan said. He grinned. It seemed he didn't hold too much animosity toward Luo Mingchuan.

Yin Biyue relaxed and nodded back, returning the courtesy. "Luo-shixiong."

Thus, the three descended the mountain together.

Dawn had just broken, and a faint shadow of the moon still hung in the western sky. The morning bell began to toll from the main peak. Its deep, solemn tone echoed unhurriedly, on and on throughout the mountain range, startling flocks of birds from the forest canopy. Although they were still in the mountains, the terrain had leveled considerably, and the main avenue they walked down was even and wide enough to allow two carriages to travel side by side.

As the three came near the Administrative Hall, they could hear voices. Many disciples were awake by now, and some were gathered there. At the sight of the three approaching, the disciples cast discerning glances their way.

This was a tranquil, peaceful morning like thousands of mornings before in the Cangya Mountains; all appeared to be the same. Nevertheless, Yin Biyue sensed something amiss. These disciples were all holding swords.

Usually, when idle, cultivators hung their light swords at their waists and carried their heavy swords on their backs. Some also utilized spatial magic or spiritual devices to store their gear. Very rarely would they hold their blades in their hands, unless they planned on using them immediately.

Chapter 15

MORE AND MORE disciples emerged, flooding the area from every direction. Each one of them had a sword in hand. Yin Biyue stole a glimpse at the two beside him and noticed the pair was walking steadily and acting as if they didn't see the growing crowd. In fact, Duan Chongxuan seemed a little excited.

By the time they were ten feet away from the Administrative Hall, throngs of Cangya's disciples had gathered. They parted to either side of the avenue as the three approached, opening a path for them to pass. Every one of them stared at the departing three fervently, but no one spoke. The air was so quiet that even a breath sounded loud.

Yin Biyue felt his stomach drop. He adjusted his pace to one best suited for drawing his sword, and started doing test runs in his head for more than three ways to break through the encirclement. But his calculated chance of success was only 50 percent; there were too many people around. Besides, he couldn't tell if there were any master cultivators withholding their qi hidden within the throng.

Just then, someone brandished a sword and shouted, "Yin-shishu! The Flower-Plucking Tournament victory is yours!"

The sudden cry made Yin Biyue jolt. He looked to where it had come from and—wasn't it the kid who'd escorted him from the dungeon the other day?! The one who got aggroed because of the halo?

Yin Biyue was struck speechless. He didn't have the time to dwell further, however, because more shouts arose from the crowd, the undulating

cheers gushing forth like the tide.

“Luo-shishu, seize the championship at Mount Chongming!”

“Yin-shixiong will win every battle!”

“Luo-shixiong is invincible!”

“Yin-shixiong, number one in the art of the sword!”

The disciples gathered on either side of the road called out to them with varying titles that depended on their seniority, but one thing was uniform: how they raised their swords and waved them back and forth. From afar, the fanfare looked like a flowing sea of blades.

Duan Chongxuan sighed happily. “This is my first time getting the ‘Sword-Waving Send-Off’ treatment.”

Yin Biyue couldn’t help but feel like he was missing something important. His feeling was correct.

“Yin-shishu is a good person. If you ever met him, you’d never believe the rumors!”

If Cheng Xi had been the only one who said this, nobody would have noticed. But there were four disciples who escorted Yin Biyue that day. In the world of rumors, three men could form a tiger, and four men could melt gold—with enough repetition, any falsehoods could become truth. They uniformly believed that there was something unusual between Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue, but it was not hostility. And the guilty party? That was *definitely* Luo Mingchuan.

The disciples of the Cangya Mountains were first class in cultivation. Likewise, their ability to spread rumors was first class.

For example, it really would be no exaggeration to say *Liu-shibo's*[22] *daughter and Zhang-shishu's son fell in love and got together* soon became *Liu-shibo and Zhang-shishu are soulmates. They are getting married at the end of the month, and the wedding officiant is the sect leader.*

When the rest of the disciples who'd been endangered in the secret realm had gathered and dissected the event in detail, they'd realized that, even with the killing array activated, they hadn't been in danger. The attacks had been concentrated on Luo Mingchuan alone—but he had chosen to take the punishment for Yin Biyue. It was downright strange.

Combining Luo Mingchuan's reaction at Qinghe Hall and what Cheng Xi's group had witnessed, the masses produced no less than ten versions of *The Untold Tales Between the Chief Disciple of Cangya Sect and the Prodigy of Xihua Peak*. However, those who speculated a love-hate relationship or hate arising from love were in the minority.

This lasted until He Yanyun appeared near the end of the discussion and wistfully said, "What do we mean when we talk about love anyway?" She clammed up when people tried to ask her what had happened inside Qinghe Hall, but the damage was done.

Thus today's scene. Waving swords in farewell for luck was a Cangya tradition. Organized by the disciples, the procession would walk the departing party from the Administrative Hall all the way to the sect's entrance gates. Years ago, the martial cultivators had waved a variety of swords, while the spiritual cultivators raised a multitude of spiritual weapons. The image of the sword-waving had been so stunning that the tradition gradually became waving swords only.

Many of the disciples participating in the send-off had to borrow swords last minute, but that didn't affect their enthusiastic cheers. Their roars shook the entire mountain. After the three had passed about a dozen feet, the hollering crowd followed after them. Their cheers were chaotic at first, but gradually, they unified. Two parties seemed to have reached a consensus: one group would shout "Luo-shixiong, seize the championship at Mount Chongming!" and the other group would follow up with "Yin-shixiong, the Flower-Plucking Tournament victory is yours!"

The wind blew through the woods just then, carrying a delightful fragrance. Yin Biyue lifted his gaze to see a dozen maidens in white skirts appear, their movements light and elegant. Their two leading figures pushed off with their toes and leaped gracefully across the trees in opposite directions—one north and one south—to unfurl two large banners written with beautiful, flowing words.

The south read: *Radiant as a pearl*. The north read: *Flawless as jade*.

Duan Chongxuan took out his fan and fanned himself as he flashed a charming smile back at the girls. "My supportive shijie and shimei have such a creative flair," he said with an appreciative sigh. "They're praising me for my pearl-like appearance and flawless character!"

Yin Biyue fought back a grimace. *Young man, you're too full of yourself. At the very least, leading lady He Yanyun is* obviously *here to support her Luo-shixiong.*

If he applied his knowledge of showbiz novels, the situation became clear. The avenue was divided into two—the south side was Luo Mingchuan's fanclub, and the north side was Yin Biyue's. The swords they waved were essentially fans and light sticks.

Luo Mingchuan’s fanclub won in terms of numbers; they were an impressive, dense crowd that stretched for miles. Even their sword-waving was in a perfect, synchronized rhythm.

Yin Biyue’s fanbase won in terms of quality. Discounting their leaders, the four disciplinary disciples, there were also the loyal fans of the Sword Sage and Jun Yu. This was Xihua Peak’s first time participating in the Flower-Plucking Tournament, and it represented the Sword Sage’s reputation. Although they were fewer in number, their cultivation was strong, and their shouts were invigorated with vital qi that brimmed from their cores.

The cheers from both sides were evenly matched.

It was unfortunate that Yin Biyue's roles in his past showbiz worlds maxed out at three-and-a-half lines, so he couldn't comprehend this energy. Otherwise, he could have raised his arms and hollered back: *Friends in the back, raise your swords! Let me see your hands!*

Standing on the tree branch holding one of the giant banners, He Yanyun smiled as she watched her sisterhood mix in with the two groups and distribute handkerchiefs embroidered with the phrases *Radiant as a pearl* and *Flawless as jade*.

Over on the tree across, Ruan Xiaolian arched her eyebrows at He Yanyun. *Will this work?*

He Yanyun nodded assertively. *Absolutely!*

He Yanyun had led her sisters in crafting the embroidered handkerchiefs overnight. They insisted on using the finest materials and the finest needlework so that the handkerchiefs were irresistible once they were in the receiver's hands. On the Cangya Mountains, it was a point of pride to own a maiden's embroidered handkerchief.

It didn't take long before the handkerchiefs were all handed out. He Yanyun broke into a satisfied smile and shot a grateful look at Ruan Xiaolian. *Thank you all.*

Ruan Xiaolian responded with a glare. *Don't be so polite!*

Thus, He Yanyun didn't say anything more. Not that she had said anything aloud in the first place.

They had grown up together; with a single look or a subtle expression, they could understand each other perfectly. As He Yanyun put it, theirs was a ride-or-die friendship. One forged through the life and death

situation of…having once snuck down the mountain to feast on roasted chicken, been caught, and punished with strikes to the palm.

Every time the sisterhood of Cangya was caught, He Yanyun had been the one to step forward to take the blame, earning her the nickname “the Scapegoat Supergirl” that had lasted until the age of thirteen. Later, as everyone grew older, they outgrew their gluttonous, mischievous ways and focused on their cultivation. It had been a long time since they last got together, so when He Yanyun brought forward her “Spousal Plan,” her friends had answered as if they’d been injected with adrenaline.

Yin Biyue didn’t know any of this. Holding the handkerchief forcibly stuffed into his hand, he only felt that something weird had been mixed in with the already chaotic send-off.

The procession quieted when they reached the colossal entrance gates. The three turned around and saluted the send-off party.

“Thank you for your farewell,” Luo Mingchuan said.

Then, amid cheers that erupted once more, the young men headed south, their robes flapping in the wind. Behind them were the first rays of sun, the majestic green mountains, and a roaring sea of swords and voices. Before them was the thorny, muddied path of the unknown.

Chapter 16

A CULTIVATOR COULD TRAVEL in many ways. Those in the state of Second Sage and above could ride the wind to cross ten thousand miles in a day or travel through space and time. Aside from those methods, anyone who had entered the doors of cultivation, regardless of level, could expend their own vital qi to increase their travel speed. They could also deploy a spiritual device or ride a mythical beast.

However, since the world had entered the Age of Spiritual Decline, spiritual devices for travel were hard to come by, and mythical beasts were rarer still. This was because the living conditions of mythical beasts were demanding. Not only did they require terrain with favorable spiritual energy, they also needed to recognize a master.

It was said that the emperor of the Northern Continent—one of the six Second Sages—kept four cyan-winged luan birds to pull his royal carriage. Each year, their upkeep consumed eight hundred thousand spirit stones and sixty thousand catties of red tourmaline fruits. Very few in the world could afford something like this.

For the group of three, with their current cultivation level, they could travel a thousand miles a day if they drove their vital qi to the max. But as Duan Chongxuan pointed out, “It’s rare for us to descend the mountain. Why rush when there is ample time? Besides, Dashixiong said we should enjoy our travels.”

Yin Biyue wanted to learn more about this world, so he wasn’t opposed. Even with the countless tomes and records piled in his memories, none of it could compare to real life experiences.

When Luo Mingchuan saw him nod, he nodded as well.

Once they left the boundaries of the Cangya Mountains, they would pass through Jin City and Yang City, cross Panlong Ridge, then take the fourth official road of the Western Continent southward to the coast. There, they would board a ferry and cross the Floating Sea, and ultimately reach Ye City of the Southern Continent to join the Cangya team before they headed to Mount Chongming for the tournament together.

This was the route they had planned. More precisely, one that Liu Qishuang had planned after much consideration. It was a path with adequate difficulty—not smooth and peaceful, but not as dangerous as traversing the Mighty Mountains either.

In the bustling Jin City, they listened to the storytellers at teahouses tell outrageously exaggerated tales of the Flower-Plucking Tournament. When they reached Yang City, they changed out of their Daoist robes and into common clothes. As they spurred their white horses and traveled on, they looked like three young gentlemen who had left home on a journey to pursue knowledge.

What surprised Yin Biyue was how amiably the chatterbox and Luo Mingchuan got along. Because Yin Biyue himself didn’t talk very much, the other two ended up conversing with each other more. It looked like a gentleman’s friendship of courtesy and polite smiles. Those who didn’t know would think Luo Mingchuan was Duan Chongxuan’s close friend, rather than an enemy he’d targeted at Xihua Peak.

The whole time, Yin Biyue thought Duan Chongxuan had succumbed to the protagonist’s aura until the day they arrived at Panlong Ridge, and Duan Chongxuan decided to change to a new set of clothes.

Yin Biyue had been uncomfortable with the many stares he'd received for his white hair, so after some thought, he draped a hooded obsidian cloak over himself. Now he was quite pleased with his own image. With the hood on, only his sharp chin remained visible—plus ten points to broodiness!

When Duan Chongxuan emerged from the lodge, Yin Biyue thought he would go blind.

Duan Chongxuan's ridiculously extravagant outfit had obviously been in his luggage the whole time, because it was clearly not sold anywhere in Yang City. He was dressed in a cross-collar long robe covered in gold-embroidered flying luan birds. His hair was drawn up with a rose-gold crown studded with pearls, and around his waist was a white-jade belt gilded with dragons, fastened by a cloisonné buckle inlaid with coral.

This bedazzling display of jewelry and finery was blinding. From afar, he looked like…like a walking gold statue!

If he had exuded a natural noble air before, his new getup *screamed* "nouveau riche wastrel"—the rich and stupid sort. Yin Biyue speculated that something must have triggered this change in Duan Chatterbox, but the man himself was grinning from ear to ear, so Yin Biyue couldn't really comment on it.

When Luo Mingchuan emerged, he seemed a little taken aback, stricken just as Yin Biyue had been by the dazzling attire. He whipped his head to the side and cleared his throat after a brief pause. "Let's go."

Yin Biyue could almost see the words *I can't bear to look* written on his face.

The ridge was dense with foliage that canopied the sky, blocking the sun, and the refreshing breeze that swept through the mountain carried the thick scent of grass and earth. Without a word, the three walked the rugged, winding trail for a long time until the sun sank in the west.

Yin Biyue wondered: Panlong Ridge wasn't known to harbor any terrible beasts, but was it really okay for Duan Chongxuan to wear a "sitting duck" outfit that reflected the light for miles?

Sure enough, speak of the devil and there he appears.

Yin Biyue sensed a disturbance and stopped in his tracks. Luo Mingchuan halted as well. A moment later, there was a rustling in the woods that was creeping toward them. The hostile newcomers did not come in peace; they didn't even try to hide their tracks.

"Stop right there!" With a loud bark, a dozen large men jumped out from among the dense trees.

The leader of the group was a six-foot-tall man with a scar down his cheek, holding a thousand-pound axe. "Where're ya from? Know the rules? Ya pass by our home turf, ya gotta pay—gold or spirit stones, don't matter. Ya leave 'em all!"

His lackeys hollered behind him in agreement. "Leave yer life if ya ain't got money!" Then they broke out in riotous laughter.

Since the leader of the brigands had started his speech, Yin Biyue had been reciting the lines in his head. Not a single word amiss. What a familiar scene.

Once upon a time, he'd have been the lackey holding an iron pole. Wait, no. He hadn't been important enough to hold one. He would've been the little guy standing behind the iron-pole-holding Shamate lackey who

was wearing ribbed jeans and whose bangs were longer than his face. At the leader's taunt, *Hey little girlie, wanna come play with the gege?*[23] he would silently leer along. Following the protagonist's shout of *Stop!* he would have been sent flying with a kick as the gang leader cried *Get him!*

The memory filled Yin Biyue with contempt for the brigands before them. These guys were totally unprofessional. Just look at the guy in the back—his expression was all wrong. He was distracted! One star rating!

Maybe they were so lackluster because he was in the protagonist's group this time, and the script had changed. Yin Biyue counted to three but didn't hear the familiar cry of *Stop!* Instead, he heard chuckling.

Duan Chongxuan was the source, and no wonder. Of all the people to mug, the bandits had chosen them: participants of the Flower-Plucking Tournament, the chief disciple of Cangya, and the Sword Sage's pupils. If word got out about this incident, the cultivation world would laugh for a year straight.

Yin Biyue glanced at their outfits. The three of them looked like two servants accompanying their profligate master out on a little jaunt. He couldn't blame the bandits for not knowing whom they faced.

Luo Mingchuan was neither angry nor indignant. In fact, he looked like he planned to reason with the brigands. Before he could speak, however, Duan Chongxuan beat him to it.

Duan Chongxuan flapped his fan. "Do you know who this man is?" he asked the brigand leader.

The brigand leader froze.

Duan Chongxuan unapologetically took a step to stand behind Luo Mingchuan. "This man is the chief disciple of the Cangya Mountains

himself—the next sect leader, Luo Mingchuan!" he proclaimed. Then he turned his nose up at the brigands in utter scorn. "Kneel at once and call him Daddy!"

"*Bullshit!*" The leader blew up immediately. "If that's the chief disciple, *I'm* the old Emperor of the Northern Continent!"

Duan Chongxuan's expression grew oddly impassive. "No, you're not."

His response went unheard as the muggers lunged at them, but before they could get close, they rebounded against an invisible vital-qi barrier and went flying high in the air. The leader crashed particularly hard, having broken two whole trees in the process.

Luo Mingchuan hadn't moved a single finger.

Lying sprawled on the ground as he puked blood, the groaning brigand leader couldn't understand how his years of robbery experience had failed him. How had this fat sheep of a target turned into an iron wall?

The leader was technically a cultivator, having attained the Marrow Purification state, and a few of the lackeys were in the Qi Cultivation state. Although none of them had the potential to progress further than that, such a group of brigands on Panlong Ridge was more than enough to rob merchant caravans or travelers who couldn't afford a security escort. Panlong Ridge was devoid of spiritual energy and lacked in natural treasures, so cultivators rarely came to this place. Without a doubt, they had been lured out by Duan Chongxuan, the walking gold statue.

The brigand leader had gone from lifting his foot to lying flat on the ground in less than ten seconds.

"Let's go," Luo Mingchuan said to his two companions.

The three stepped past the weak, pained cries of mercy to continue on their way—and the above scenario repeated again and again. They encountered similar groups of bandits about every ten miles. Even after the sun had set, there were groups who came for them holding torches.

Yin Biyue was slowly coming to understand what Duan Chongxuan was doing. But if the goal was to cause trouble and inconvenience for Luo Mingchuan, this method was too low-level. What was he *really* trying to accomplish? It couldn't possibly have been to do heaven's work and purge the mountain of brigands.

Finally, once it was truly dark, peace came at last. The dappled glow of the cool moon spilled through thick foliage, chilling the late spring evening wind. The three found a secluded cave in the woods to rest overnight, and after Duan Chongxuan burned away the cobwebs, the withered branches, and weeds with a fire talisman, they settled inside.

Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue sat and prepared to meditate while Duan Chongxuan continued to make the space comfortable. He took out a luminous pearl and embedded it on the cave wall. A soft glow illuminated the cavity. Next, he hauled out a large, carved rosewood bed canopied with silk-tulle drapes.

"Sishixiong, I also prepared a bed. Do you want to lie down?" he asked.

Yin Biyue thought he had grown accustomed to Duan Chongxuan's oddities, but this was the oddest thing yet. He couldn't stop the corner of his mouth from twitching. "No thanks."

"Aw, okay…" the Chatterbox mumbled before climbing in alone.

As the moon traveled westward in the night sky, its oblique light filtered into the cave and mingled with the resplendence of the luminous pearl. The cries of insects and the wind rustling through the mountainous forest were the only sounds that interrupted the quiet. Because the cave wasn’t big, Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan were only a few feet apart. In the cultivation world, this was an offensive distance. If they were strangers, three feet was a sign of disrespect; if they were enemies, three feet was a sign of threat.

Yin Biyue was a little uncomfortable. He couldn’t tell if the unease was a residual reaction from his body, or if it was his internal guard.

A cultivator’s senses were particularly keen after reaching the Spirit Concentration state. Even without deliberate effort, he could sense the breathing of the one beside him. On this cool night, he could also sense his warmth. These sensations only amplified as time pushed on and the night deepened.

He wondered if the well-mannered Luo Mingchuan felt the same discomfort, or if the latter had already immersed himself in meditation, reaching the zone where he was ready to use spirit stones to begin cultivation. As a spiritual cultivator, he should have spirit stones on him.

Contrary to what Yin Biyue imagined, Luo Mingchuan was reminiscing.

He felt the atmosphere familiar, as if he’d been transported back to the Hall of Night Study at Lanyuan Academy. An aloof and taciturn boy was studying at a desk as the gentle yellow glow of the lamps illuminated his profile, softening his edges with an illusion of tenderness.

Where was Luo Mingchuan? He was sitting beside the boy, his desk stacked just as high with books and scrolls and the lamplight glowing bright. When he grew tired from studying, he would watch the boy. Though he was youthful, he was good-looking, and to stare at him was to feel rejuvenated. Because he was so absorbed in his books, he never noticed Luo Mingchuan's subtle glances.

The Hall of Night Study and the library were connected by a midair suspended corridor. Students would come to the hall to study overnight when they needed to finish perusing books that couldn't leave the premises.

Luo Mingchuan didn't often frequent this hall, but every time he did, he saw the boy sitting in the same spot under the west window. Sometimes, he couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of him. Many times, he had wanted to tell him, *Shidi, you're still so young. You won't grow tall if you pull so many all-nighters.*

He never did, though. He seemed to recall the boy didn't like being reminded of his age.

Deep in the night, when the students who studied here grew tired, they would whisper with their neighbors. It helped to refresh the mind, and sometimes, to make a friend. However, over the countless times Luo Mingchuan sat beside the boy, they did not talk. The boy never showed fatigue nor any desire to speak. Luo Mingchuan didn't want to bother him. Until one time, the boy looked up to stare at his own desk lamp with a small frown.

The academy was a humble institution that didn't use oil lamps. When the lamp's candles burned for too long, the wicks would split and their flames would dim.

Sensing the boy's movement, Luo Mingchuan looked at him and chuckled. "Shidi," he asked in a low voice, "have you forgotten to bring your wick cutter?"

The boy tilted his head, his clear, black eyes reflecting the warm yellow candlelight.

"Yes."

Luo Mingchuan rose to his feet and leaned over to help him trim the wick, his long hair cascading over his shoulder. He was close enough that he could see the shadow cast by the boy's long eyelashes. Their shadows cast upon the west window seemed to have blended together.

Moments later, brightness returned to the table, and Luo Mingchuan retreated to a polite distance.

The boy nodded. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, Shidi," Luo Mingchuan said, setting the wick cutter down before he introduced himself. "I'm Luo Mingchuan from Qiong Prefecture of the Eastern Continent."

"Yin Biyue from Ying'an City of the Central Continent."

These words were the first to pass between them, and the few they exchanged in the three years they had spent at the academy.

At that moment in the dimly lit Hall of Night Study, where shadows danced and intertwined, where thick, dusty old tomes lay silently, where aged, mottled lamps flickered as their wicks sparked, time stopped.

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YIN BIYUE THOUGHT Luo Mingchuan had to be deeply uncomfortable as well, since his breathing was unsteady.

Thankfully, the day was breaking and the sky lightening by then. Yin Biyue picked up his sword and stepped out of the cave. The morning breeze greeted him, sweeping away the confusion of the night. Dawn had come—the perfect time of the day to practice the sword.

Chapter 17

YIN BIYUE'S SWORD was named Yihu and had been given to him by his discount-bin master via Jun Yu. During his past three years in the Cangya Mountains, he had practiced the "Coldwater Blade" a million times—it was so ingrained in him that it was now second nature. Nonetheless, after his trip to Lanyuan Academy, it was no longer the same Coldwater Blade he'd once practiced.

Yin Biyue sheathed his sword just as dawn broke. A tree the size of two men standing together toppled next to him with a thunderous rumble. In the next breath, every tree in a hundred-foot radius fell, startling flocks of birds out of the woods. Standing in the center of a field of snapped trunks and branches, encircled by lingering sword qi, he glanced around nervously.

"I haven't seen you practice in ages, Sishixiong!" Duan Chatterbox hooted. "I see you've improved! Congrats!"

Beside Duan Chongxuan was Luo Mingchuan, who smiled and inclined his head.

Yin Biyue relaxed. If Luo Mingchuan couldn't detect anything unusual, his method proved that no one in or below the Breakthrough state would notice anything amiss. Moreover, given that Luo Mingchuan practiced the Ghara Pupil Technique, his eyesight should be sharper than most. Perhaps Yin Biyue could raise the standard. It seemed that he would have no trouble avoiding suspicion from his opponents at Mount Chongming.

He couldn’t inject his vital qi into his sword, but the trip to the academy had given him an idea to work around this predicament: to wrap the surface of the sword with his vital qi. The method had to have been tried before. But there was more to it than that, because the vital qi dispersed quickly and required a tremendous amount of output. Given his current ability, if that was all he did, he wouldn’t last longer than a cup of tea.

However, his soul was strong. Using that strength, he could condense his consciousness; that force then locked the vital qi over the sword’s surface. The drawback of this method was that the stronger the opponent, the faster his mental strength drained. Fortunately, with a power-leveled soul condensed over multiple transmigrations, he recovered quickly. One night would suffice at his current cultivation level.

Yin Biyue had already made up his mind that this was the best way to deal with his sword situation. As soon as the Flower-Plucking Tournament was over, he would return to Cangya and examine the issue further in seclusion. It was a great taboo for a sword cultivator to swap swords halfway through their cultivation, but if Yihu failed to work for him, he’d have no choice.

Yin Biyue turned around and nodded at the other two. “Let’s go.”

Duan Chatterbox happily caught up to him.

Today’s grand, orthodox cultivation drama (premiering on New Year’s Day) was once again replaced by a slice-of-life sitcom. By the third time they were mugged, Luo Mingchuan struck before Duan Chongxuan could step forward to tell the bandits to kneel and call him Daddy.

Yin Biyue noted Luo Mingchuan’s impeccable control. No matter how outrageous the other party’s behavior or how foul their language, Luo

Mingchuan remained unruffled. He never seriously harmed anyone. If his heart was as steady as he appeared, he had terrifying self-control. Duan Chongxuan probably wanted to test Luo Mingchuan. Or rather, to see his true colors. What would Luo Mingchuan do when facing the most vulgar insults from a pissant opponent? The answer was…Luo Mingchuan did what every do-gooder would've done, every time.

Bright spring blossoms had wilted into the lush greens of summer. The soft earth beneath their feet and the dancing, dappling light of the foliage uplifted the mood. Just when Yin Biyue thought things would continue this way forever, an unexpected twist opened the door to a new world.

This time, Luo Mingchuan killed.

Vibrant red blood gushed from the dead man's neck and soaked the brown earth. The head lay severed from the body, face frozen in wide-eyed terror. Yin Biyue was rooted where he stood.

It took a moment before he realized what had just happened. Could the tolerant Luo Mingchuan really act so decisively?

This group wasn't entirely composed of brigands—rather, it included casual martial artists and cultivators in their Qi Cultivation state. They roamed Panlong Ridge, leaving lone travelers alone and waiting for the right opportunities to strike at poorly secured merchant caravans.

Luo Mingchuan had wanted to reason with them at first, but Duan Chongxuan had beaten him to the punch with his "kneel and call him Daddy" schtick. Predictably, the muggers' foul language surged forth like the tide. Unpredictably, their target wasn't the one who'd initiated the verbal attack nor Luo Mingchuan who'd been placed on a pedestal.

“Bullshit! What Cangya Sect? Look at that guy in the back, hiding his face like a woman! He’s obviously ashamed, huh!”

Before Yin Biyue noticed he was catching strays, the jeering laughter halted. Luo Mingchuan had made his move.

The aura he usually withheld exploded out of him, the invisible pressure rippling the air. He only killed one man, but the rest were severely injured.

Yin Biyue unconsciously took a step back.

Luo Mingchuan snapped out of it. Had he scared Yin Biyue? It made sense—his shidi had never witnessed such violence before. The anger in his heart dissipated as he held Yin Biyue’s gaze.

“Yin-shidi, you entered the academy at a young age and haven’t experienced much of the world, so it’s natural that you wouldn’t understand how treacherous it can be,” Luo Mingchuan said, his voice soft. “As cultivators walking this world, we cannot allow others to insult us without cause. There will be times when we must draw our swords.” He couldn’t tell if he was justifying his action to Yin Biyue or himself. “Besides, they are villains. If I don’t harm them today, they will harm another tomorrow.”

Yin Biyue was dumbfounded. Had he really just been lectured on morals by a Goody Two-shoes? Where did that leave him, the villain?! In spite of himself, his face fell.

‹Ding! The villain expression ‘sharp glare’ appeared! Conditions met. The halo is now activated!›

Yin Biyue no longer had any hopes for the halo’s effect. In fact, he would give it a negative review and the worst rating! The seller was a scammer! No one was frightened to tears by just a glare!

Luo Mingchuan felt slightly helpless—no, *frustrated*—at his loss of self-control. Yin Biyue was frozen in place, looking distraught. His heart was as kind and soft as Luo Mingchuan had thought. Just as well. With him around, Shidi would be protected. If Yin Biyue didn't like to witness the loss of a life, Luo Mingchuan would avoid letting him see the kill next time.

Luo Mingchuan had just made up his mind when he saw Yin Biyue continue on his way. Duan Chongxuan hurried after him. Not daring to let Duan Chongxuan walk in front again, Luo Mingchuan dropped a quick "I will scout ahead" and gathered his vital qi, darting out of sight.

Yin Biyue was still ranting about the scammy seller in his head when he heard Dong Chongxuan address him.

"Um, Sishixiong, are you angry?"

Huh? Yin Biyue didn't know what he meant.

"Sishixiong, please don't be angry. I know I was wrong." Duan Chongxuan's tone was careful. "I'll go back to my old outfit tomorrow."

Yin Biyue continued not to know what he meant! *What happened to "the masses have sharp eyes"? Which one of your eyes saw that I'm angry over Luo Mingchuan killing some guy?!*

"I wasn't angry," Yin Biyue said. This concerned the dignity of a villain, so he felt compelled to explain himself.

Duan Chongxuan was deeply moved that his sishixiong forgave him despite his flippant behavior.

"Sishixiong, what do you think crosses the line for Luo Mingchuan?"

Yin Biyue still didn't know what the hell he was saying! How had the subject changed so fast? He had no clue what the answer would be. If he'd

been asked last night, he would have said there was no limit to the bleeding-heartness of a bleeding heart! Luo Mingchuan had kept himself so firmly in check during the previous encounters; there'd been no reason for him to suddenly go off.

The chatterbox's voice drifted on the wind, but Yin Biyue still managed to catch his next words clearly: "Luo Mingchuan's limit is you."

EXCUSE ME? SAY THAT AGAIN?!

Yin Biyue was so shocked that he didn't catch the rest of Duan Chongxuan's relieved mumble.

"If that's the case, maybe I'll *consider* handing you over to him. Shijie might also consider it. Still, let's observe him for a while longer and see how he performs…"

"Do not be presumptuous," Yin Biyue heard his own stiff voice say.

Duan Chongxuan clamped his mouth shut.

Yin Biyue had no time to dwell on the subject because he spotted Luo Mingchuan's back ahead of them. Then his eyes were captured by the sight of the group of a dozen people standing in front of Luo Mingchuan. They were dressed in cyan Daoist robes with wooden crowns fastened on their hair, and their expressions were icy.

Obviously, this group had blocked Luo Mingchuan's way—or it might have been a chance encounter between rivals rather than a deliberate obstruction. Regardless of the relationship, the mountain path was narrow, and someone had to yield.

Yin Biyue approached and recognized the "Eight Trigrams" array on their robes. Baopu Sect. He knew then that this was no longer a matter of yielding.

Chapter 18

BAOPU SECT, one of the four sects in the “One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects,” was also located in the Western Continent and neighbored the Cangya Mountains. One sect sat in the north and one in the south. Each gazed forevermore at the other in the distance. These days, Cangya was the sect most thought of whenever the Western Continent was mentioned, but two thousand years ago, Baopu Sect had been the major sect of the Western Continent whose reputation far exceeded that of Cangya. Had it not been for the birth of a Sword Sage on Cangya… The rise of the Cangya Mountains had thus been accompanied by the Baopu Sect’s decline. Suffice to say, the Sword Sage and Baopu Sect did not enjoy a good relationship.

The wheel of history rolled on, leaving behind the glory of the past to be buried in dust. Yet there were those who refused to forget—and refused to accept it. For sixteen hundred years, Baopu Sect had suppressed their resentment, passing it down through the generations along with their Eight Trigrams array.

Luo Mingchuan had released his Breakthrough-state aura while he scouted ahead to avoid hassle. Sure enough, it repelled petty criminals and saved him from plenty of headaches. However, he hadn’t expected to encounter another group of cultivators taking the roundabout route to the Flower-Plucking Tournament. His aura had presented as a provocation and led to his current predicament.

A man stepped forward from the group of cyan-robed cultivators. He was only in the early stages of the Spirit Concentration state, but he was

plenty arrogant when facing Luo Mingchuan, who was in the Breakthrough state.

“What fool dares obstruct Baopu Sect from conducting their business?”

Luo Mingchuan initially planned to give way. But as soon as the other party spoke, he turned to face the group properly and bent halfway at the waist.

“Luo Mingchuan of the Cangya Mountains’ Xiqian Peak.”

Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan had joined him, and when they heard Luo Mingchuan introduce himself, they both saluted with cupped hands.

“Yin Biyue of the Cangya Mountains’ Xihua Peak.”

“Duan Chongxuan of Xihua Peak.”

They had each given a half bow, but the other party had to give a full bow. This was because Luo Mingchuan was Cangya’s chief disciple, and Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan were the Sword Sage’s disciples. The Baopu Sect disciples were all a generation younger than them.

The disciple who had spoken first snapped back to his senses after the initial shock. Now stormy-faced, he nonetheless led his group to return the courtesy. When Luo Mingchuan had given his name earlier, he had almost barked back: *Do you think I was born yesterday? Why would the chief disciple of Cangya look so shabby?* But he swallowed his words when the other two arrived. No one would dare falsely claim the title of the Sword Sage’s disciple.

The Baopu Sect disciples’ arrogance was to be expected. Luo Mingchuan wasn’t wearing his Cangya uniform, but a set of simple,

common robes. Yin Biyue's black cloak was covering half his face. And Duan Chongxuan's dazzling gold-statue outfit was…remarkable. The three didn't appear to be the disciples of any major orthodox sect, which made them look soft and ripe for bullying.

However, Luo Mingchuan had bowed first, and that turned the "soft" into a "soft knife"—Baopu's uniformed disciples ended up the vulgar, impolite bumpkins in contrast. If Luo Mingchuan hadn't bowed, the strict etiquette of seniority didn't need to be observed, as they were not from the same sect. They had no choice but to respond now, and they bowed back with repressed resentment.

The voice of a man came just then, his cold tone carrying an indisputable weight. "Step down, Shizhi."

Joy flashed across the face of the leading Baopu disciple. His response was immediate and respectful. "Yes, He-shishu."

It wasn't just him; the dozen other Baopu disciples all looked delighted as they parted to either side of the road to welcome the man who emerged from the forest.

Yin Biyue had known that the leading disciple couldn't have been the strongest among them for them to act so condescending. Moreover, they had been shocked but not panicked after learning the backgrounds of Yin Biyue and his group, which meant the actual leader had to be someone whose status and cultivation level were on par with theirs.

Despite being addressed as "Shishu," it was a young man who walked out of the woods. He was slim and pale. The same cyan Daoist robes on him adorned him in gloom, like moss that had accumulated on a stone over many years. His Breakthrough aura was fully unleashed, and the

impressive force rivaled Luo Mingchuan's. The Baopu disciples gathered behind him.

The tables had turned. Yin Biyue started to ponder which technique to use if he had to draw his sword.

The man cupped his hands in a salute and gave a half bow. "He Lai of Baopu Sect."

His name was simple to the point that it was strange, but recognition dawned on Luo Mingchuan's face—the man was famous.

"We didn't realize that Cangya's distinguished disciples were here. Please forgive us for failing to recognize you earlier and offending you." The man's tone carried a hint of disdain. Although he spoke words of apology, he showed no intent to step aside. Instead, his tone implied their odd outfits were the cause of the trouble. He glanced at Duan Chongxuan with a look of contempt and subtle disappointment.

He Lai was disappointed indeed. The world had long speculated what kind of characters the Sword Sage's disciples would be. He was participating in the Flower-Plucking Tournament this year largely because he heard news of the Sword Sage's disciples joining. Now that he'd seen them for himself, he thought they were nothing special. Their reputation far exceeded their reality, and it didn't seem like they'd been worth the journey.

There were no fools present, so everyone discerned what he'd implied. The Baopu disciples snickered, the air ringing with their unpleasant contempt.

Duan Chongxuan grinned in his usual manner, then he stepped forward and nodded. "It's nice to meet you, He-shixiong! Your reputation precedes you."

Yin Biyue sharply sensed that the chatterbox's aura had shifted; it was a dominance that was innate, not falsely amplified. Even his flamboyant gold-silk long robe seemed to transform into stately royal attire. When he said "nice to meet you," it sounded like a command to kneel.

"Shifu often taught us, 'follow one's heart's desires without overstepping the universe's boundaries,'" Duan Chongxuan continued. "Our hearts should not be moved by material things, and our eyes should not be deceived by what they see. He also taught us 'I am the center, which manipulates all things,'[24] and not the opposite, in which we are slaves to things. If one's mind is firm on the path of cultivation and one acts in accordance, swords and fans, Daoist robes and glamorous robes, are all but material things."

He Lai looked upset, but he couldn't denounce the Sword Sage as *incorrect.*

Duan Chongxuan's smile grew twisted. "To meet is fate. Although traveling on a road bears the principle first come, first served, today I've had the privilege of meeting fellow Daoist friends of the Baopu Sect. How humble and upright you are. What hidden noble characters! I am truly in awe. My friends, since you are in such a hurry with no time to waste, there is no reason why we can't yield." He pointed at the road with his fan and graciously stepped aside. "Please go ahead!"

The Baopu disciples' faces clouded over during the speech, and they waited for He Lai to decide how to respond.

However, Luo Mingchuan didn't give them a chance.

"A fight over a narrow path is a small matter, but if word of this gets out, Cangya risks being labeled a bully. Our sect has always emphasized

proper etiquette. We cannot take on such a bad name.” He also stepped aside and made a yielding gesture. “Please go ahead!”

Yin Biyue couldn’t draw his sword at this point. Duan Chongxuan might have given a long, roundabout speech to say *Ew, gross, go away,* but Luo Mingchuan had bluntly told them, *You’re too weak to be worth it.*

Xihua Peak’s diplomat combined with the Cangya Mountains’ diplomat—how had the two with maxed-out language skills been paired up?! For the first time, Yin Biyue truly understood the power of words.

Baopu Sect would look like ungrateful brats if they didn’t take the road after all that. The other party had yielded twice over—anything more they could say or do would be unreasonable.

He Lai saluted them with cupped hands and gave a curt “We shall meet again.” He spun on his heels and led the group of Baopu Sect disciples away.

After they’d disappeared in the distance, Luo Mingchuan led the way anew.

Eventually, Yin Biyue couldn’t resist any longer. “Did Shifu really say something like that?”

“I’ve only seen Shifu’s portrait. Who knows what His Elderliness said!” Duan Chongxuan declared.

Yin Biyue’s jaw nearly dropped. This guy dared to fabricate the words of the Sword Sage? If he’d been born in the Northern Imperial Capital, he would’ve been the type to falsify imperial decrees. The cops were going to raid him, sooner or later!

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THE CYAN-ROBED Baopu Sect disciples continued on their way down the mountain trail enshrouded by the thick canopies of foliage.

It wasn't too long before a resentful disciple complained. "He-shishu, are we gonna let it go just like *that?*"

He Lai, who had been silent until now, flashed a pleased smile. "Cangya has fallen so low that all they have to rely on is cheek. What is there to fear?"

"It's true!" someone else agreed. "And you'll teach them a lesson when the Flower-Plucking Tournament comes around, Shishu."

"Is the one with his face hooded really a disciple from Xihua Peak?" another wondered. "He didn't look like a good person to me."

Another disciple, the one who'd clashed with Luo Mingchuan first, sneered. "Oh, I didn't believe they were from Cangya Mountains at first, but as soon as he came out, I *knew* it was true! Half a month ago, the scout planted at the foot of the mountain range sent a message. Someone from Xihua Peak hit a snag in their cultivation, and their hair turned white overnight! It's probably the same one who's trying to cover himself up."

The others shared a look of understanding. "Their cultivation must've been terribly damaged," one disciple said. "Why even bother participating in the Flower-Plucking Tournament?"

Talking and laughing, the Baopu Sect disciples continued onward in high spirits.

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DUAN CHONGXUAN didn’t care to argue for the sake of it; he just didn’t like being taken advantage of. His upbringing had taught him that there was never a reason to roll over for others, whether through words or actions. Luo Mingchuan didn’t enjoy arguments either, but he believed there was no need for violence when the issue could be resolved with words. Even if he only used words, he could not allow wanton humiliation. They were staunch in their principles and didn’t care how they appeared in the eyes of others.

I probably won’t have a chance to draw my sword before the Flower-Plucking Tournament, Yin Biyue thought.

He was still a little puzzled, though. “The one named He Lai from earlier—is he well known?”

Duan Chongxuan shot him a questioning look before breaking into a triumphant smile. “You should’ve asked him that in person, Sishixiong. He’d be so furious he’d spit blood all over his Daoist robes!”

Yin Biyue really didn’t know. Even though he read through the tomes and scrolls in Lanyuan Academy and knew the history of the origins of each sect like the back of his hand, he wasn’t current with the new geniuses and prodigies who had emerged in the last hundred years. He only knew the Tempest Sword Zhong Shan of Qinglu Sword Sect; that guy was too famous to miss.

“Do you know ‘Baopu’s Seven’?” Duan Chongxuan asked.

“I might have heard of them,” Yin Biyue replied after a beat. “Is there one named Lin Yuangui?”

Duan Chongxuan thought the other six would also spit blood all over their robes if they heard that. “He Lai is the fifth of the Seven, Sishixiong,” he explained patiently.

Understanding dawned on Yin Biyue. *But…if the fifth is* that *uncool, how pathetic are the last two?*

“Among the Baopu Seven, four are spiritual cultivators and three are martial cultivators,” Duan Chongxuan continued. “Their leader, Lin Yuangui, is like our dashixiong at Xihua Peak. The other six have sort of made it their lifelong goal to claim fame in the realm. Odd training philosophy, if you ask me. I sometimes think Baopu Sect grouped them with Lin Yuangui just to make the numbers.”

The chatterbox’s unstoppable mode had activated.

“What sort of logic is that, though? Does having more people automatically mean victory? If I were to gather the thirty-six Heavenly Stars and the seventy-two Earthly Fiends at Cangya and build an army of a hundred and eight good men, would I dominate the entire cultivation world? If I were Lin Yuangui, lumped together with those six all day every day, I would’ve abandoned and betrayed my sect a long time ago!”

How big of a grudge did he hold against Baopu Sect? Yin Biyue was stunned. On second thought, he understood. Baopu Sect, the eternal Second Place, held a hostile attitude toward the Cangya Mountains. Most importantly, he knew the Sword Sage had a *very* poor relationship with Baopu Sect.

The Sword Sage. Again.

Yin Biyue felt conflicted every time he thought of this unearned master of his. He couldn't understand why, when the Sword Sage had been gone for so many years, he would message Jun Yu to take him in as a disciple on his behalf. Yin Biyue shot a glance at Duan Chongxuan, who was passionately immersed in his rant. He couldn't tell what the Sword Sage's standard for taking disciples was *at all*!

When Yin Biyue thought of the Sword Sage, he also thought of Headmaster-xiansheng. Apparently, those two were close friends. Of all the outstanding pupils at the academy, why had xiansheng picked him to do his bidding? Could it have been a mutual attraction between villains?

Tsk. The way the big shots act these days is always so confusing, Yin Biyue thought. If he had a resume, it would be simple:

My name is Yin Biyue. I am a villain. I love cultivation, sword practice, critical thinking, and not caring. I am a man who will become the ultimate villain. You can insult me, but you can't insult my life's goal. You can question me, but you cannot question my professionalism. The protagonist has a winning cheat code—wherever he wants to go, the world must yield the way. I have a fiendish villain halo—I can kill gods and obliterate the divine in my way.

I am Yin Biyue, and I approved this message.

Bleh, that was so corny!

Chapter 19

THE HORSE CARRIAGE clattered on its way down the Western Continent's official road, raising clouds of dust. The young master seated within drew the curtain and peered out with his pair of slightly raised phoenix eyes. Once in a while, a maiden in another carriage on the road would meet his sparkling eyes while peeking out the curtain. Flustered, she would quickly avert her gaze with reddened cheeks. But there were also more brazen ladies who would cover their mouths and giggle. Duan Chongxuan smiled back at every single one of them.

Yin Biyue was not impressed. After spending so many hours smiling like that, his entire face surely ached!

Since their encounter with the Baopu Sect disciples, the three had lost interest in rambling and sped up their pace. They descended Panlong Ridge in less than three days. Their travels via the official road were peaceful as expected. Duan Chongxuan had then rented a horse carriage at a post-station inn and employed a driver. As they rolled down the road, Duan Chongxuan would draw the curtains and peer out every so often. In his words, this was one of the best ways to travel, for both cultivation and for life.

Yin Biyue honestly couldn't understand why the chatterbox was acting as if riding a carriage was akin to riding a cyan-winged luan bird. Did this guy only ever fly when he went out? No, he'd probably been too cooped up in Xihua Peak.

By comparison, Luo Mingchuan was much quieter. With only three people in the carriage and Duan Chongxuan busy looking at the passing

scenery and ladies, the quiet felt a little awkward.

Maybe only Yin Biyue felt that way. He couldn't say.

At least it was only awkwardness and not a needle-sharp prickling sense of danger. In the past, as soon as Yin Biyue closed the distance between himself and Luo Mingchuan, Yin Biyue would tense up in unease and raise his guard. Traveling in a cramped horse carriage, the distance between them was barely three feet, even when they sat on opposite sides. However, as time went on, he grew inured to Luo Mingchuan's presence. Once in a while, when he met Luo Mingchuan's gaze, he could manage to force the corner of his lips into a smile. What commendable progress.

While Yin Biyue became more forthright, Luo Mingchuan ended up feeling guiltier.

Luo Mingchuan was determined to undo his foolish promise that had harmed Yin Biyue and dispel him of his obsession, thus steering him back to the right path. Luo Mingchuan's past life experiences filled him with confidence: He was a man who could recognize and rectify his own mistakes! He *had* to do better, but…whenever his shidi raised his eyes to look at him, a fleeting twinkle shimmered there, and Luo Mingchuan's heart fluttered in response. He felt as if he stood in the midst of summer, under a shower of locust blossoms carried in on the evening breeze outside the academy's library.

Yin Biyue was just three feet away. Luo Mingchuan gathered his spirit and began to concentrate on reciting the Purification Mantra.

Yin Biyue sensed the subtle change of the air inside the carriage—after Luo Mingchuan had closed his eyes, the spiritual energy around him calmed into tranquility.

Martial cultivators emphasized long hours of strenuous training. In that vein, sword cultivators practiced the sword day after day, sharpening the force of their techniques. What mattered to spiritual cultivators was the strength of their spiritual power and the suitable cultivation methods to harness it. Yin Biyue recalled Luo Mingchuan had been a martial cultivator when he first entered Cangya. His master had taken great pains to find him a good sword called Chenzhou. Nobody expected that after he attained the Marrow Purification state, his spiritual powers would awaken, making him better suited for spiritual cultivation.

Yin Biyue recalled the past. When they'd exchanged blows inside the Secret Realm of Violet Firmament, Luo Mingchuan had borrowed the power of the dense woods nearby to block his sword attack, triggering an infinite cycle of withering and flourishing. He surmised that Luo Mingchuan's spiritual power was disposed to control the vitality of plants.

During the interrogation in Cangya Dungeon, Luo Mingchuan had cast the Ghara Pupil Technique. Yin Biyue had researched it afterward—in this world, it was Buddhist magic that originated from one of the twin Buddhist temples, Xingshan Temple. It wasn't magic taught in the Cangya Sect. Perhaps Luo Mingchuan had learned it while he studied at Lanyuan Academy or had acquired it under other circumstances. The Ghara Pupil Technique wasn't a guarded secret, but it still demanded exceptional spiritual prowess. From this, it was apparent Luo Mingchuan's spiritual control was next to immaculate.

So far on their journey, Luo Mingchuan had repelled brigands by forming a barrier with his vital qi. It was clear he was teeming with the stuff. In other words, his spiritual meridian was large enough to store a

considerable amount of vitality. Spiritual cultivators were a pain. Who knew what other weird spells or contingencies he had hidden up his sleeve.

From the corner of his eye, Yin Biyue caught sight of the sword Luo Mingchuan hung at his waist. It was a deep-green, simple longsword. Like young green bamboo that had just broken from the soil, it was unbending in the wind and unsullied in the rain. Like a lone boat on a river braving tempestuous winds and waves, holding fast to its original purpose despite a night of storms. The form of a gentleman. The masterpiece the master swordsmith Yan Qing had spent ten painstaking years to forge—the gentleman's sword, Chenzhou.

Luo Mingchuan had always carried his sword openly, but few noticed it because he held himself with such calm that it weakened the sharp aura of the sword. Even if it *were* noticed, carrying the sword seemed a show of gratitude toward his master Zhengyangzi.

Yin Biyue suddenly felt a chill. If Luo Mingchuan had truly abandoned the sword, why did his sword not reek of disuse? If he had continued to pursue the art of the sword, how had he diverted his attention to cultivating his spiritual powers? Countless cultivators before them had proven that trying to balance both paths led to disaster.

Yin Biyue had perused over half of the collection in the academy's library, the subjects of which encompassed everything. He dug through his brain for a similar case matching Luo Mingchuan and came upon a result at last. Someone like Luo Mingchuan didn't exist in the present era, but one had hundreds of thousands of years ago in the Age of Sages.

It was a Sage from Xingshan Temple known as the Master of All Paths. Since the time humankind had learned to utilize the spiritual energy

of the universe and transform it into their own vital qi, he had been the only one on record to have broken the barrier between Buddhist cultivation, spiritual cultivation, and martial cultivation. However, the Master of All Paths had long since passed on without leaving behind any legacy, just as that period of history had vanished like smoke.

Inside the carriage, it was as tranquil as a still lake—a mood that seemed perfect for contemplating history. Following Luo Mingchuan's lead, Yin Biyue closed his eyes.

Before humankind, the first to appear on this earth were the mythical beasts born of the universe's spiritual energy. Prehistoric humans, in the process of fighting various mythical beasts and the harsh natural environment, gradually learned how to cultivate, and thus entered the age of civilization.

Four hundred thousand years later, the trend of cultivation had reached its peak. Countless Sages and Second Sages swarmed the land. Some even managed to touch the door of the Heavenly Will, reaching immortality—a state even higher than that of a Sage. Concurrently, the demonic dominion rose in prominence, giving rise to a great number of powerful demonic cultivators who reached the state that rivaled the Immortal: Demon Lord. This period lasted for a hundred thousand years and was known as the Age of Sages—resplendent but brief in the long course of history.

The Age of Sages had drawn to a close with a devastating war that wrought absolute destruction. Countless cultivators were lost in those flames, and many sects and prominent clans were cut short. The Eastern Continent's demonic dominion also suffered, splitting into the Twelve Palaces. After the war, heaven sent forth a great tribulation, veiling the sky

with molten fire and fracturing the earth with numerous infinite abysses. The Heavenly Tribulation had lasted for an entire year, engulfing the five continents in misery and death.

A thousand years after, spring grass sprouted anew, and the continents gave birth to new life.

The Eastern Continent, given the dominance of the demonic dominion, remained a land of chaos, and the major cities within were their own sovereign states.

In the Western Continent, the Baopu Sect and the Cangya Mountains established their institutions, one in the north and one in the south, with the Mighty Mountains between them standing as a boundary. The two sects became the founders of the Western Continent's new order. Many prominent families chose to build towns and cities nearby, and in time the lives of cultivators and ordinary folks alike returned to normal.

In the Southern Continent, the legacies of the Qinglu Sword Sect and Xingshan Temple survived the great war, and thus they carried on their orders.

A Second Sage appeared on the Northern Continent. Under his leadership, the demonic dominion was expelled and the land unified, thus establishing the Northern Imperial Dynasty.

Everything seemed to be recovering.

But people soon realized that the highest level of cultivation a cultivator could reach stopped at Second Sage. The problem appeared to be a limitation in their innate potential, leaving them with no choice but to await their eventual decline over the long march of time.

Over the subsequent six hundred thousand years, when one Second Sage fell, another would rise. Fortunately, a Second Sage's lifespan was also long, measured in thousands of years. Gradually, people came to accept a world without Sages. Thus began the long and arduous Age of Spiritual Decline.

This had lasted until Wei Jingfeng transcended the thunderous Heavenly Tribulation and became the Sword Sage. Whether his accomplishment was a sign from the Heavenly Will or purely coincidental, it meant times had changed, sending shockwaves throughout the realm.

For a thousand years after that, geniuses and prodigies across the continents sprouted like young bamboo shoots after the rain. Many showed the potential to reach Sagehood, such as Jun Yu, the chief disciple of the world-renowned Sword Sage, Lin Yuangui of Baopu Sect, and Qu Duiyan of Lianjian Sect. Aside from them, there were occasional rumors of other young people whose names remained yet unknown to the world, who chose to train quietly. Change would come to the five continents as these young geniuses matured over the next thousand years.

Though too many variables existed to predict exactly what would happen in the future.

Headmaster-xiansheng had dubbed this era the Age of Stars. Many cultivators, after learning their sect had produced a prodigy, would boast: "We live in the shining Age of Stars!"

The Sword Sage's emergence marked the end of the old era and beginning of a new one.

How cool is that? Yin Biyue thought.

But was a change of era really a good thing? Change implied conflict, and conflict led to turbulent times.

Yin Biyue opened his eyes to observe Luo Mingchuan, who still had his shut. He sat poised in this jittering carriage, his breathing tranquil. Chenzhou hung just as tranquil on his waist. Yin Biyue didn't know what role Luo Mingchuan would play in the future. Maybe this was the best of times, and the worst of times.

Luo Mingchuan chose that moment to resurface from his meditation. He opened his eyes and locked gazes with a pair of eyes as cold as the stars in the sky. Yin Biyue's gaze was boring into him, focused and silent. A hint of worry stirred there.

Like a pebble disturbing a pool of still water, Luo Mingchuan's settled heart stirred again. He subconsciously averted his eyes, hoping to hide his embarrassment from Yin Biyue.

"Is something the matter, Shidi?" Luo Mingchuan asked.

Yin Biyue froze like a deer in headlights the second Luo Mingchuan opened his eyes. What to do when caught staring at the protag?!

I was just thinking about how your future storyline would go—if you'd be a man of valiance or a man of ambition.

Oh, it's nothing. I'm just staring at how hot you are, lol.

"Lol," my ass! Those answers sucked!

And Luo Mingchuan just *had* to ask, "Is something the matter, Shidi?"

F—! (Hey, can I swear in this novel?!)

Yin Biyue felt all the blood in his whole body surge to his face—never had he been in a more awkward situation. *With how bizarre Luo Mingchuan's brain is, will he think I was watching him the whole time? He'll definitely think I'm a perv! OMG, how embarrassing!*

The more flustered he became, the less he could think of a way out of his predicament. Just when he had decided to give up and mutter "Nothing, I'm just looking," a voice echoed in his head.

‹Ding! User embarrassment level exceeded 100. Predicament identified. Would you like to activate Halo Helper?›

Chapter 20

YIN BIYUE HAD ALMOST FORGOTTEN the existence of the Halo Helper. It seemed to require certain conditions to activate, so it hadn't popped up since that one use in the Cangya Dungeon. That one test run wasn't anything mind-blowing either. An invisible force had compelled him to make facial expressions and gestures—that'd been all.

Luo Mingchuan glanced away for a moment before returning his gaze. Yin Biyue gritted his teeth.

"We've arrived at Xian Harbor!" came Duan Chongxuan's excited shout. He dropped the curtain and twisted back. "Sishixiong, we'll be crossing the sea!"

The awkward air in the carriage dispersed. Yin Biyue nodded curtly to indicate he'd heard.

Nope, nope, nope. There's no point in using it now.

‹Ding! You have chosen not to activate Halo Helper. Friendly reminder that you have two test runs remaining. Halo Helper, your great friend. Making your problems come to an end!›

No! I don't want to use it again if I can help it!

Yin Biyue stared at Duan Chongxuan's excited face, perplexed. Why would someone who was usually "normal" (not) be so thrilled traveling outside of home? Had someone injected him with adrenaline? How could he stand looking outside for so long? Was the outside really that fascinating?

“Whoa—” The driver reined in the horse, slowing the carriage to a stop, and turned to his passengers with a smile. “Milords, we’ve arrived at Xian Harbor!”

Duan Chongxuan was the first to hop off the carriage. He slapped a tael of silver in the driver’s hand.

The driver frowned. “Sir, I can’t break this.”

Duan Chongxuan waved magnanimously. “Keep the change!” Then he eagerly strode away toward the docks.

Yin Biyue only caught a glimpse of the blithe chatterbox’s back as he rushed off. If he had a tail, it’d be wagging happily. How embarrassing. Thank goodness he wasn’t wearing Cangya’s uniform. Thank goodness his face wasn’t labeled with *Sword Sage’s Disciple*.

Luo Mingchuan was the last to dismount the carriage. He thanked the driver before following Yin Biyue toward the docks.

They were immediately accosted by the salty wind of the sea. Xian Harbor was the largest harbor on the southern coast of the Western Continent. It was a bustling sea port with hundreds of ships mooring and setting sail in turns. From dawn to dusk, crowds clamored here at all hours of the day. Even after night fell, the lighthouse at the end of the pier that shone over the undulating waves of the sea illuminated the faces of those waiting for the return of distant ships.

The setting sun gilded the sea for what seemed like forever, reaching the horizon in the far distance where the sky and the water were divided by a thin, golden thread. Above the waves circled a few sea birds draped in the fiery golden color of twilight. Before them were magnificent waves that lapped at the shore, as the rolling flames at the ends of the world devoured

the heaven and the earth. Duan Chongxuan regarded the ocean from the pier, his robes dancing in the wind, his eyes shining bright.

Yin Biyue could almost imagine his inner dialogue: *Gonna be on a boat! I might be a little excited!* ~€(≧▽≦)/~

Or some shit like that.

Compared to the upcoming long journey on the sea, the previous part of the road had been nothing. If everything went according to plan, they would be spending a month and a half on a ship before disembarking at Baijing Harbor of the Southern Continent, after which they would continue onward to Ye City.

Yin Biyue couldn't help but feel sorry for Duan Chongxuan. After this trip, he might not want to ride a boat ever again in his life.

The harbor buzzed with its usual vibrant energy as the cacophony of barks and greetings between boatmen hauling cargo and the blaring of boat horns mixed in the air. Upon the deck of the most magnificent, four-storied, nine-masted ship was a large middle-aged man in brown sparring robes. He was directing the boatmen to unload cargo. His voice was loud and resonant, and his eyes were sharp. His aura set him apart from ordinary men. Yin Biyue peered closely at him and found that he was a cultivator in the Marrow Purification state. He was probably the captain of this harbor's largest ship crew.

Luo Mingchuan obviously thought the same. Channeling his vital qi, he leaped and landed like a falling leaf on the forty-foot-tall ship. The cargo handlers cried out in surprise and scattered in panic, then they eyed him with a mixture of respect and curiosity. The crew's captain approached to receive him with a polite greeting.

From the distance, Yin Biyue watched Luo Mingchuan exchange a few words with the captain. The captain started out friendly, but he donned an apologetic smile as the conversation went on. In the end, Luo Mingchuan cupped his hands in a salute of gratitude before jumping down from the ship to rejoin the others.

Yin Biyue didn't see what the problem was; usually, any ship would be more than happy to take on cultivators. Although well-equipped ships carried powerful cannons, cultivators were more agile in their strikes. They would be additional help in encounters with sea beasts and pirates. Besides, Luo Mingchuan held the jade badge of the Cangya Mountains. They should've been welcomed with open arms.

The answer was soon revealed to Yin Biyue. Sounding helpless, Luo Mingchuan explained, "The captain says there's been a surge of sea beasts on the Floating Sea. The ships that set sail four days ago managed to send fragmented messages back only yesterday. The situation is somewhat dire. No ships will set sail in the next ten days."

Duan Chongxuan watched the sea, his expression unchanged by the news, as if he were unsurprised. Yin Biyue, on the other hand, was shocked. Based on the pattern of sea beast surges in previous years in the Floating Sea, the next horde shouldn't have been until the end of the eighth month. It was only the fifth month now. This was abnormal.

Only two paths remained before them: to settle in Rong City just beside Xian Harbor and wait until the ships sailed again in ten days, or turn around and cross the snow field that connected the Western and Southern Continents. Obviously, the first path would be the wiser choice of the two.

Then, Yin Biyue realized there might be a third path.

Under the white lighthouse at the pier stood a red-robed boy who seemed a little lost. The red ribbons that tied his double-looped hair danced in the wind. It was the same boy who had guided Yin Biyue through the academy a few months back.

The boy's face split into a delighted smile when he spotted them, and he jogged over. "Xiansheng was right. You're really here, Shixiong," he said cheerfully.

Luo Mingchuan was a little thrown off by the boy's sudden appearance, having never met him before, but he could guess who this "Xiansheng" was.

The boy dug out three thin papers folded into squares from his sleeve. "Shixiong, Xiansheng said the three of you may encounter an inconvenience while crossing the sea, so he sent me to give you these notes." He dutifully handed out said notes.

Luo Mingchuan accepted his reverently with both hands. "Please thank Xiansheng for us." An elder's gift was not to be declined, never mind one bestowed by Headmaster-xiansheng.

Ride the wind and break the waves, climb the mountain and pluck the flower. For this cause, I send this note to wish you well. Time is of the essence; delay begets change. Sincerely, Headmaster-xiansheng.

Yin Biyue stared at the proper Taige script upon the snow-white paper that was stamped with the familiar raised red ink. It felt as if everything everywhere in the world rested within Xiansheng's grasp. Was this the power of a Second Sage? Could the other five Second Sages in the world be equally omniscient as Xiansheng? This realization made Yin Biyue uneasy.

“Where will the note take us?” Duan Chongxuan asked.

“Xiansheng said the northern outskirts of Ye City,” replied the boy.

Yin Biyue nodded to himself. That was a deserted hill off the beaten path. It was neither dangerous nor conspicuous. Moreover, it was close to Mount Chongming.

The boy was about to bow and take his leave when he seemed to remember something. He turned to Duan Chongxuan. “Xiansheng also asks if your father is well.”

Duan Chongxuan was taken aback at first but managed to respond smoothly. “He’s very well. Healthy and energetic. He can ride around the horse track ten times without breaking a sweat. His arrows are as on mark as twenty years ago. He eats four large bowls of Southern Continent corn every day and snacks nonstop at night. Please thank Xiansheng for asking after him.”

The boy listened to the response carefully and didn’t comment. He bowed to the three of them and then vanished at the entrance of the harbor.

Yin Biyue found the entire exchange strange—Xiansheng’s question was odd, and the chatterbox’s answer was equally so. Duan Chongxuan’s father had to be someone extraordinary for Xiansheng to ask after him, right? Yin Biyue had already thought about the subject before, even going as far as entertaining the wildly outrageous idea that Duan Chongxuan was the Sword Sage’s illegitimate son. But if the man was extraordinary, why say something as mundane as how many bowls he ate? Unless Xiansheng had meant *Can he still eat in his old age?*

“Twenty years ago… How old were you, to remember…?” *The valiant posture of your father’s archery?*

“It’s all made up!” Duan Chongxuan replied with gusto. “He hasn’t sent me a single letter in three years. Who knows how he is!”

Yin Biyue was too stunned to respond.

He turned his attention to the notes in each of their hands. All three were identical. He then honed in on the lines of the stamp on his own note in an attempt to unravel any hidden danger. Instantly, he felt a needlelike prick on his consciousness. He suspected he wasn’t at a level to do anything about it just yet. It would seem he had no other choice.

“Let’s trade,” he said, handing his note to Luo Mingchuan.

“Huh? Sishixiong, what’s the matter?” Duan Chongxuan asked.

Luo Mingchuan was puzzled as well. “Hmm? Shidi?”

Yin Biyue offered neither explanation nor reason. He extended his hand in silence, unrelenting until Luo Mingchuan took his note. The sea wind blew, raising the hood covering his face and revealing the stubborn, determined eyes it had hidden. His white hair, a stark contrast to the black cloak, seemed ever more brilliant.

“We will trade,” he reiterated with a tone so firm that neither wind nor waves could shake him.

Luo Mingchuan relented after a confused pause and handed over his note.

Chapter 21

As soon as Yin Biyue took hold of Luo Mingchuan's note, he gripped his sword and injected the stamp with his vital qi. His form vanished from the pier. He sensed the indistinct howling of the wind and waves, the clamor of markets, the flying dust upon the official road, and the dazzling sun of early summer—even though all of them flashed past in a moment's time.

The next second, his foot touched solid ground. Before he could see the trees in front of him, a powerful force yanked him backward. Even though he had his defenses up, Yin Biyue stumbled. With no time to turn around, he injected a massive amount of vital qi into his sheathed sword and stabbed behind him—only to have his strike dissolve as if it were nothing.

A Small Ascensioner!

He didn't resort to his contingency, however. The pulling force disappeared, and a voice rang out behind him. "Wait, pal! I mean no harm!"

The speaker released Yin Biyue's shoulder and withdrew his aura as he stepped back.

"A cultivator friend…"

Finally, Yin Biyue turned his head. He was taken aback—not because of how strikingly handsome the man was, but because he looked…familiar.

The man was stubbly, and his pulled-back hair was messy. He had on somewhat worn, dark-brown sparring robes, and a wine flask hung from his hip while a changdao[25] rested on his back. With this uncouth, "down in the

dumps in the jianghu, wandering and indulging in drink" getup,[26] he didn't seem like a cultivator at all. Upon closer inspection, however, he had striking features that matched the thick eyebrows that arched toward his temples. His clear and piercing gaze softened the flirtatious charm of his dreamy almond eyes. Overall, he seemed like the unhurried and disobedient sort.

The man was studying Yin Biyue as well. "Lao-si…?"

The chatterbox's voice sounded behind them. "Sanshixiong! Why are you here?!"

Now shocked beyond measure, the man turned his head and exclaimed, "Lao-wu!" He lifted his hand and pointed at Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan. "Wow, how did you guys just pop out of nowhere?! And Lao-si… What happened to your hair? I didn't even recognize you!"

Yin Biyue finally figured out why this man looked so familiar. He was the elder disciple who rarely returned to the Cangya Mountains, Yan Xing. The last time they met had been when Duan Chongxuan joined the sect and prostrated himself in front of their master's portrait.

Yin Biyue nodded at Yan Xing. "Sanshixiong, it's a long story…" He trailed off, leaving the question unanswered since he had no clue what the answer for his white hair *was*. He changed the subject. "Wushidi and I have come to the Southern Continent to attend the Flower-Plucking Tournament."

"What about you, Sanshixiong?" asked Duan Chongxuan.

Yan Xing shifted awkwardly. "Me? It's an even longer story…" Without warning, he tensed and his expression hardened. "Conceal your breath!"

Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan tensed up too. Their elder shixiong was already in the Small Ascension state. Whom could he be hiding from?

His eyes fell on where he had landed. An array flag was planted not two inches from that spot. Yan Xing had probably yanked him back so as to not disturb the array. Eight more such flags were planted in the woods around them in a zigzagging circle with about a thirty-foot radius. The three of them were in the center.

This is a concealment array, Yin Biyue concluded after studying the formation. It was a crude arrangement that anyone who'd learned a bit about arrays could discern—if the caster were not someone like Yan Xing, a cultivator with a high level of ability.

Yin Biyue flicked his fingers and shot forth a stream of vital qi. As the gentle breeze swept past, two of the array flags shifted directions. He changed his hand sign, and the northernmost flag shifted slightly southward by half an inch. The adjustments had been minimal, but the array was transformed. It felt as if even the wind quieted upon entering the formation.

Yan Xing sensed the change and relaxed. He gave Yin Biyue a hearty slap on the shoulder. "Good going, Lao-si!"

His generous gesture made Yin Biyue lower his head a little in embarrassment. "You flatter me, Shixiong."

He was well aware that the adjustments to the array couldn't have been possible had Yan Xing not trusted him. But if Yan Xing's foe was stronger, wouldn't they see through the array? And if they were weaker, why hide?

The nearby woods rustled as the faint white form of a man passed through the trees. Grasses and leaves crunched under his boots as he neared

—he was making no attempt to hide himself.

Finally, he emerged from the brush, a sword in hand. He drew closer and closer to the array, close enough that Yin Biyue could see the ink landscapes painted across his expansive sleeves and the dour, severe look on his face. Yan Xing tensed again, this time with nerves, and he clamped his mouth shut, holding his breath. His anxious state affected Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan, who raised their guards and stared intently at the newcomer.

A familiar voice suddenly broke the suspenseful atmosphere.

“Junior Sect Leader Song,” said Luo Mingchuan.

Startled, the one who’d been called “Song” turned around. “Luo-shixiong?”

Yin Biyue could finally confirm that Xiansheng no longer wanted Luo Mingchuan dead. At least not for now. Otherwise, the slightest tampering in the spatial passageway would’ve been enough to erase Luo Mingchuan to the very last bone. On the contrary, Xiansheng seemed to genuinely want the three of them to attend the Flower-Plucking Tournament without issue.

Hilariously, Xiansheng probably hadn’t predicted their current situation, because he wasn’t so bored that he’d actively divine the relationship between Yan Xing and Junior Sect Leader Song.

Outside the array, Luo Mingchuan and the junior sect leader exchanged greetings.

“Why are you here so suddenly, Luo-shixiong?”

“A surge of sea beasts in the Floating Sea has stopped the ships from sailing,” Luo Mingchuan said. “Fortunately, Headmaster-xiansheng sent a

note embedded with spatial magic that sent me here. Junior Sect Leader, have you seen anyone else in these woods?"

"I have not…but if it's a note from Xiansheng, I'm sure it's fine. Maybe your companions have landed somewhere farther along? Don't worry, Luo-shixiong. It just so happens I'm searching for someone too. We can search together."

"The future sect leader of the Cangya Mountains and the junior sect leader of Qinglu Sword Sect," Duan Chongxuan commented from the safety of the array. "Well, well. Seems they get along nicely."

The Cangya Mountains didn't have a "junior sect leader" title, but there was an understanding that the chief disciple was to become the next sect leader. From the conversation between the pair, Yin Biyue identified the young man as Song Tang, the next sect leader of Qinglu Sword Sect. "Fleeting Grace Sword" Song Tang. He was older, higher in cultivation level, and had claimed fame much earlier than his peer of the same sect, the Tempest Sword Zhong Shan.

Yan Xing breathed a sigh of relief now that Luo Mingchuan had distracted Song Tang. "Wait, that guy looks familiar, too." When he squinted his eyes for a closer look, realization dawned on him. "I see, so it's Luo Mingchuan from Xiqian Peak… Lao-si, Lao-wu, do you guys have any idea how we can get him to lure Song away?"

Yin Biyue nodded. He concentrated his vital qi and, controlling it with his consciousness, transmitted a message to Luo Mingchuan's ears.

"Luo-shixiong, Duan-shidi and I are located inside Yan Xing-shixiong's concealment array approximately ten feet north of you. Yan-shixiong is the one Junior Sect Leader Song is searching for." The

implication was clear. Since they were inside the array, they didn’t want to be found.

Shock flickered across Luo Mingchuan’s eyes, though his expression remained unchanged. Beside him, Song Tang didn’t notice anything amiss.

“My search isn’t urgent,” Luo Mingchuan said, smiling. “I plan to go on ahead to Ye City and find temporary lodging for the duration of the Flower-Plucking Tournament.”

The Flower-Plucking Tournament this year was hosted by Qinglu Sword Sect. As the junior sect leader, Song Tang handled most of the affairs regarding the event—such as the lodging for the disciples of various sects. Sure enough, Song Tang quickly turned apologetic.

“How inconsiderate of me to forget you have traveled from afar, Luo-shixiong. You must be weary. My sect already has your accommodation prepared. I will take you there right now.”

Yan Xing watched as the two disappeared into the woods before he slapped Yin Biyue hard on the shoulder a second time.

“You’re amazing, Lao-si!” he exclaimed.

Yan Xing was very different from what Yin Biyue had imagined, and their interaction made him recall many things about him.

Chapter 22

YAN XING'S CHANGDAO was named Duanshui—*water slasher*. He hadn't been the one to name it, as he didn't deem one necessary; a weapon was a weapon. It was the world who had given it the name.

That year, Yan Xing had just begun his journey down the mountain. Upon the desolate plains of the Eastern Continent, he beheld the majestic Wei River that torrented across the land. Feeling fortunate, he followed the course of the river, his energy surging with each step. By the time he came to the middle reaches of the river, he had attained the Small Ascension state.

His breakthrough had come too easily, and his aura was so overwhelming that it caused great displeasure to an elder who happened to pass by.

The elder, a man from the Baopu Sect, ordered his entourage of servants to set down his palanquin. He emerged, lowering himself graciously to Yan Xing's level. From across Wei River, he scolded Yan Xing.

"Who is your master, boy? How rude and disrespectful you are. Why do you not restrain your aura when meeting an elder? Such arrogance. You will not go far in your cultivation! Know that slashing water makes it flow stronger. The path of cultivation is treacherous, with none to help you through the hardships but yourself. Young people these days. They obtain a bit of power and think they are invincible. You will surely stumble in the future!"

The elder's speech was worded like a lecture, yet it teemed with curses and resentment.

How unreasonable, Yan Xing thought at the time. *A river lies between us. Even if my aura is out, it wouldn't have impacted you. Besides, your level is only a little higher than mine.*

That man had not taught him nor raised him, yet he had put on the air of a teacher and scolded him. It had reminded Yan Xing of something his shifu had once told him.

"Not everyone who has lived a long time or has a high cultivation level carries themselves with the poise of a senior master. There will always be some who, the stronger they are, the more arrogant they become. The longer they live, the more they fear death. Those individuals cannot bear to see young people show off their talents—it makes them embarrassed and frustrated by their own decline."

The Sword Sage had regarded Yan Xing as he continued to reminisce.

"I encountered many such individuals when I was younger. Of my three disciples, you resemble me the most, so you are likely to encounter them as well. When you do, remember this: Fight them if you can win. If you cannot, piss them off."

Thus he concluded: *"Young people need to show off."*

It was unfortunate that Duan Chongxuan hadn't joined the sect yet. He could piss people off in record time. Yan Xing had been very young at the time, but he had his own methods. He was youthful, and if something displeased him, he would draw his weapon. So he pulled out his changdao

and slashed down—not at the man across the river but at the mighty Wei River itself.

Unrelenting, unforgiving waves three thousand feet high surged upward to the sky. The vital qi of the elder across the river rushed out, and he rose into the air to meet the colossal wall of water in a powerful clash.

The fight between the elder and Yan Xing lasted over a day, inundating both banks of the river in a deluge. The disturbance attracted many people to the desolate plains, but as the fight was between two cultivators of the Small Ascension state, they could only watch from afar. By the time the river water lowered, the spectators were shocked to find that the Wei River was henceforth severed into two.

The young man's changdao was sheathed, his clothes were sodden, and his black hair dripped. Yet none of the spectators cared how unkempt he looked. They were too full of satisfaction at witnessing his triumph.

"My master is Wei Jingfeng," Yan Xing said. This was the answer to the elder who had demanded to know his master. Next, he declared, "'Slashing water makes it flow stronger'? I don't see it." As if to say, *I showed* you *slashed water.*

No one knew the rest of the tale because the story was exciting enough as it was—enough to make a strong young man famous.

He had slashed Wei River with his changdao and the river forked into two branches. Thus, his changdao came to be called Duanshui.

Such a brazen character, one who dared draw his changdao to slash water in the face of a Baopu Sect elder halfway to the Great Ascension state, was skulking in the forest outside of Ye City and poorly casting array

magic to hide from a young man whose cultivation level was beneath his. What tragic business. Fascinatingly tragic.

It wasn't just Duan Chongxuan who was curious what had transpired between the two now that Yin Biyue had remembered that story. Upon seeing the imploring gazes of his shidi, Yan Xing reluctantly recounted his affair with Qinglu Sword Sect's junior sect leader.

Six months ago, Yan Xing had arrived on the Southern Continent for the sake of the famous Drunken Immortal wine offered in the taverns of Rong City. He had been traveling for a long time at this point. His drinking buddies all knew that the more inebriated Yan Xing became, the clearer his eyes. The only part of him that exposed his inebriation was his drunken words.

That day, he drank from morning until the taverns closed for the night. He hadn't used his vital qi to dissipate the alcohol in his system, but plastered as he was, his stride was steady. No one on the street could tell he was so hammered he couldn't discern male from female or humans from animals. That was when he encountered Qinglu Sword Sect's Song Tang.

Song Tang had been leading a group of his sect's disciples down from the Qinglu Mountains to head to Ye City, and Rong City had been one of the stops. Noticing the man blocking their way in the narrow street was someone in the Small Ascension state (despite his slovenly appearance), Song Tang decided to yield the way. But the man stopped him.

Out of courtesy, Song Tang introduced himself. "I am Song Tang of Qinglu Sword Sect. Is there anything I can help you with, my friend?"

To his surprise, Yan Xing only burst out laughing. "Song Tang? As in 'candy-giver'? What a sweet name, you beautiful little thing!"

This was in the middle of the night with barely anyone around. An enraged Song Tang lunged at Yan Xing with his sheathed sword.

Yan Xing was soup-brained at this point. Considering this was his first-ever attempt at flirting with a girl, it was fine if she wanted to smack him around a bit. Except… Ow! This girl hit *hard*.

Song Tang hadn't expected the man to take his attack without fighting back, and his one strike broke the man's leg. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to apologize. Cultivators in the Small Ascension state took just a few days to recover from such minor injuries, so he would be fine. Song Tang left behind a bottle of medicinal pills and continued on his way.

The story should have ended there. Junior Sect Leader Song had beaten the rascal and vented his anger, and all was well. Trouble was, a month later, Yan Xing ran into his drinking buddies in Ye City and overindulged again.

One of his buddies asked him, "I heard you told Song Tang his name is sweet to his face?"

"Ha ha ha! He's even sweeter than his name," Yan Xing responded with a broad, nonchalant wave.

That day, Taihe Pavilion was packed with chattering crowds. In less than half a day, talk of the incident spread throughout Ye City and spiraled out of control beyond its walls.

Since then, whenever Junior Sect Leader Song was mentioned in the Southern Continent, what came to people's minds wasn't Qinglu Sword Sect, his sobriquet, "Fleeting Grace Sword," or his sword style, the "Feathered Raiment," but that he was sweeter than his name.

So Candy-Giver—ah, no—Song Tang was furious this time. He swore he would find Yan Xing to fight him. Even with their differences in cultivation level, he didn’t think he would lose.

Yin Biyue thought this was perfectly understandable. If anyone called him drop-dead gorgeous like “bi yue”—*hidden moon*—he’d draw his sword and teach them a stern lesson.

Meanwhile, Duan Chatterbox’s focus went in the wrong direction, and he grinned evilly. “Which leg of yours did he break?”

Yan Xing paused, then caught on to the implication. “The right leg! Get your dirty mind outta the gutter!”

Knowing he was in the wrong, Yan Xing didn’t want to fight Song Tang and planned to leave the Southern Continent.

“I haven’t even held a girl’s hand yet,” he complained. “Just because I misspoke one time, now I’m called a perv throughout the entire Southern Continent. Drinking only leads to trouble!”

He unstrapped the flask at his waist and took a swig.

Yin Biyue wordlessly studied himself and his companions. Incredible. All three of them were wildly different characters. *Shifu! Did you actually pay attention when you took us in?! Were we just the freebies you got in a “Buy a sword, get a disciple free” promotional event?*

His tale told, Yan Xing remembered the reason his shidi were here. “That’s right! Sishidi, just let yourself go wild at the Flower-Plucking Tournament. No one is your match!”

Sanshixiong, where did you and Dashixiong get this random confidence in me?!

Yan Xing emptied his flask and waved at them, not bothering to pick up the array flags he’d planted. “Song might be back in a sec, you never know… Green hills never change, clear waters flow evermore. We shall meet again. The next round of drinks are on me!”

The instant he spoke, he was already some distance away. He soon vanished.

As Yin Biyue watched Yan Xing’s retreating figure, a serious problem quickly came to him. Xihua Peak and Baopu Sect never saw eye to

eye—their match would be a nasty one. On top of that, Yan Xing had offended Qinglu Sword Sect, to which the prodigy Zhong Shan belonged…

How could they proceed with the Flower-Plucking Tournament at this point?!

Chapter 23

YE CITY WAS THE NEAREST CITY to Mount Chongming. Those who came to attend the Flower-Plucking Tournament were settled into their designated lodgings that had been arranged by the host. This year, of the competition's alternating hosts—those in the One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects and the Twin Buddhist Temples—the organizing host was Qinglu Sword Sect.

Since Qinglu Sword Sect was already on the Southern Continent and had a history with Ye City's administration, organization of the event had largely been a breeze. For the Flower-Plucking Tournament, they'd put in some real effort, and not only for the sake of glorifying the profound wealth and history of their sect. If all went smoothly, the pride of their sect—Tempest Sword Zhong Shan—would be bringing home the victory.

Arrangements for the lodging of the numerous sects, the defense barrier at the foot of Mount Chongming, and the repair and maintenance of mountain paths had started half a year prior. Although Yin Biyue and his two companions had arrived a month early, the courtyard beside Qiushui Lake designated for Cangya's disciples was ready. After Song Tang dropped off Luo Mingchuan at the lodge, he actually returned to the city gate to wait for Yin Biyue and Duan Chongxuan.

Ye City had a long history dating back to when it was just a town at the beginning of the Age of Spiritual Decline. Due to its ideal geographic location and smooth roads, it had been a prominent city for a thousand years in the Southern Continent's northwestern region. Since the establishment of the Flower-Plucking Tournament, the city had rapidly

flourished and expanded. Now, it boasted eight large gates that tens of thousands passed through every day.

Evening had fallen by the time the three convened and entered the city, just in time for the garrison guard change. The foremost majestic city of the Southern Continent's northwestern region was at last revealing its grandeur to the group.

Squads of soldiers marched through the city at an orderly pace, solemn and grave. Their heavy black armor gleamed and long black blades hung at their waists. None of the city citizens batted an eyelash at their appearance. The old uncle working the wonton stall by the roadside was still hawking, the buskers on the bridge were still hollering, and the children on the streets were still romping with wooden swords and candied-fruit skewers in their hands. The fury of the garrison guards had somehow miraculously blended into the liveliness of the city.

Were the guards not for maintaining the neat and solemn image of the city? Why weren't any of the roadside stall vendors afraid of them?

"What do the garrison guards here do, exactly?" Yin Biyue asked.

The three strolled down the large avenue. Duan Chongxuan fanned himself as he noted the ladies waving their handkerchiefs from high pavilions with a sparkle in his eyes.

"The garrison guards of Ye City? Tough job, that," he replied. "Never mind that they have to walk around everywhere in full armor in such hot weather, when they encounter cultivators brawling, they have to maintain order and request the cultivators fight elsewhere to avoid hurting the children on the streets and the greenery. When powerful individuals start trouble in the city, they have to open the underground tunnels and lead

women, seniors, and ordinary folks to shelter. And they have to handle the little things too. When they encounter old grannies hauling a hefty load, they have to help carry their stuff! Awful, isn't it?"

Luo Mingchuan smiled and picked up where Duan Chongxuan left off. "The street we are on right now is Ye City's main avenue. It's a high-traffic area, so if we were riding horses, these black-armored guards would remind us to dismount, lest we collide with pedestrians or street vendors. They maintain a stoic appearance for the sake of asserting the city's authority to deter visiting cultivators from acting up."

"The job might be a bit tough, but the salary is high," Duan Chongxuan said with a chuckle. "Not to mention the people love them and the city administration has their backs. Here, it's a great honor for the family if their son passes the examination and is selected to enter the garrison guard. Ye City is probably the only city like this in the whole Southern Continent."

Yin Biyue was filled with emotions. Ordinary folks and cultivators, fine wine and swords, peddlers and black-armored guards found harmony here in this city. Abruptly, he remembered the root cause of this peace was Lord Ye, a powerful individual in the Great Ascension state who ruled as Ye City's master. Few in the Southern Continent dared cause trouble in his jurisdiction. He was strong enough to make his own rules—strong enough to single-handedly protect his domain. Yin Biyue was a little in awe of the man.

Yin Biyue was completely unaware that the reason he felt this way was because, deep in his subconscious, he also had something he wanted to protect. Perhaps it was the misty Xihua Peak; perhaps it was his genuine and protective peers; perhaps it was the majestic, endless ranges of the

Cangya Mountains; or perhaps it was the disciples who'd waved their swords to send him off. The sentiment was extremely contrary to a villain's code of conduct, but Yin Biyue didn't notice anything amiss.

The city lights lit up energetically as the sky darkened and the last shimmer of day faded. Large red lanterns hung on the eaves of major households, gilded and ornate lanterns dazzled the charming song halls, and the warm glow of streetside taverns spilled into the streets through doors and windows alongside a mix of merry conversation and the sweet scent of drink. With its sea of lights and continuous streams of crowds, Ye City after nightfall was even livelier than during the day.

The three strolled off the main avenue, leaving behind the lights, the music, and the hustle and bustle of the city center. The evening faded into stillness as they neared the southern district. Down alleyways of long bluestone streets, the interspersing light and shadows sometimes revealed the establishment plaques or stone auspicious beasts of deep courtyards.

Past the affluent residential area of the south district was Qiushui Lake. Without the lights of the mortal world fighting for brilliance, the radiant stars bathed the land in their glow and the surface of the lake shimmered with their reflections. It was tranquil but not desolate. The new complex of courtyards stood by the lake without a whisper, blending seamlessly into the night.

They stopped by the lake and breathed in the refreshing air as the night breeze caressed their faces. For the next month and a half of the Flower-Plucking Tournament, they would be staying here.

"Including us, Cangya will have thirty people total here," Luo Mingchuan said. "There are ten courtyards, meaning three to four in a

yard.”

Yin Biyue hadn’t yet understood the implication before Duan Chongxuan spoke up. “Sure, let’s stay in one together.”

When Yin Biyue remained quiet and seemed to silently accept the arrangement, Luo Mingchuan released a relieved breath and relaxed. “Shall we, then?”

The three headed for the courtyard closest to the lake. The largest courtyard on the north side would be reserved for the Xiping Peak elder leading the team.

“There are attendants here who look after the housekeeping, but with only the three of us, their services aren’t necessary. Shall I dismiss them?” Luo Mingchuan asked.

“It gets hectic with more people around, so that would be fine,” Duan Chongxuan replied. “What do you think, Sishixiong?”

Yin Biyue nodded, his mind occupied by the thought that this geographical location was perfect for practicing the Coldwater Blade.

The courtyard, newly built six months ago, was neat and tidy. As it was the flowering season, the white blooms peeking out from the green foliage on the magnolia tree in the yard added a touch of beauty to the small courtyard. The courtyard itself wasn’t big; the four rooms were not distinguished as primary or secondary. Yin Biyue picked one randomly. A nephrite desk and a flowing silk canopied bed adorned the space. It was neither ostentatious nor shabby. He was very pleased with it.

Suddenly, a large crash rumbled from the room next door, startling Yin Biyue. Next door was Duan Chongxuan’s room! He picked up his

sword and dashed outside, bursting into the room next door—only to see the chatterbox moving furniture.

The silk-curtained wooden bed had been swapped out with his own carved rosewood bed canopied with silk gauze drapes. The desk was swapped for a long, lotus-patterned table inlaid with mother-of-pearl and curled, balled legs. The loud crash earlier was the sound of a large yellow rosewood cabinet inlaid with various gems hitting the floor. No rare treasures stacked the room, but the nacre, pearls, gold, silver, and gemstones embedded in the furniture alone gleamed with a dazzling brilliance. Yin Biyue suspected Duan Chongxuan could bring out a whole palace if he wanted to.

Duan Chongxuan noticed Yin Biyue, grasped why he was there, and hurried to apologize. “Was I being too loud, Sishixiong?”

Yin Biyue shook his head. “No. I just thought something happened to you.”

Duan Chatterbox’s face split into a wide grin when he heard him. “You’ve come just in time, Shixiong! I was about to look for you.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Miss Yun Xiangrong of Ye City, famed across the Southern Continent for her exceptional pipa-playing skills, will be performing tonight at the Golden Autumn Pavilion…”

Understanding dawned on Yin Biyue almost immediately. Duan Chongxuan was inviting him to a brothel!

Step into the pavilion in the night:

Upon which ornamented lanterns sway and long sleeves flow;

Upon which a beauty plucked the strings, in melodies mellow.

Life without a visit to the brothel was incomplete! The mere thought of it was making Yin Biyue a little *excited*.

It wasn't that he wanted to actually do something there. He'd just never experienced anything of the sort in all the lifetimes he had lived. The unknown was tantalizing. Besides, running to a gleaming brothel in the black of the night was a thrilling thought.

He was just about to nod when Duan Chongxuan stiffened, his delight neutralizing into a serious expression.

"Across from Golden Autumn Pavilion is Taihe Pavilion. A storyteller will be performing on stage there tonight, so captivating and enthralling in his accounts that he's won thunderous applause every time. It's very much worth going. What do you say, Sishixiong?"

Yin Biyue was taken aback, then shocked and deeply ashamed of his own vulgarity in contrast to Duan Chongxuan's virtue! He turned around and, following the latter's gaze, saw Luo Mingchuan standing by the door with a faint smile playing on his lips. He had the poise of a gentleman.

"Shidi, you two are heading out to listen to a storyteller?" he asked.

"Yep!" Duan Chongxuan nodded rapidly. "Want to come with us, Luo-shixiong?"

Yin Biyue felt even more ashamed.

Chapter 24

IF THE HOBBY of the Cangya Mountains was gossip and spreading rumors, then Ye City's citizens' distinctive custom was watching and discussing spectacles. Longtime peace and prosperity had made the locals audacious. They dared to watch any scene and talk of any tales.

They would talk of how the demonic cultivators of the Eastern Continent were tirelessly trying to revive the demonic dominion; how extravagantly wealthy the royalties of the Northern Continent were; how stunning the most beautiful woman of Lianjian Sect must be; and when their own city master, who worried them half to death, would marry at last. The people of Ye City enthusiastically gabbed about every major and minor event of the world, as if every participant was a prominent figure capable of shaping history.

Even when night fell, business at Taihe Pavilion was no less than that of Golden Autumn Pavilion. A stage was set up on the first floor of the main hall. A storyteller in long robes, having rinsed his mouth with the finest Maojian tea, saluted the full house audience below with a bow. Thunderous applause and cheers erupted.

The main hall on the first floor was packed. Up on the second floor, in a secluded corner, sat three young men. One was a refined, poised gentleman, one was a dashing young master, and one was cloaked in black with his face obscured. Ye City bustled with all sorts of odd cultivators, so their attire didn't draw any attention.

Yin Biyue sipped on the pot of Bashan Sparrow's Tongue tea Duan Chongxuan had ordered and felt a myriad of emotions stir within him. He

never expected the three of them would actually come listen to a storyteller!

Downstairs, the storyteller had already begun. He spoke from his diaphragm, and his powerful voice carried far and wide.

“I’m sure everyone here knows the Flower-Plucking Tournament of Mount Chongming set to occur two miles outside our city will be taking place soon. Strong young talents from many sects will gather, and all sorts of extraordinary abilities will be on display. It’s a rare, once-in-a-decade grand event!”

Just when the crowd was thinking today’s tale would be about the Flower-Plucking Tournament, the storyteller changed the subject. “But let’s not discuss the tournament right now. What shall we talk about instead? Let’s talk about…Headmaster-xiansheng of the Central Continent and his prophecy!”

From below the stage, a cacophony erupted. As exciting as the Flower-Plucking Tournament might have been, it had already been discussed for many days, and everyone could practically recite the legend of it by heart. Something new captured more attention.

Yin Biyue tensed when he heard Headmaster-xiansheng named. *What prophecy?*

The storyteller began: “Two stars appear. The dragon and the serpent clash. Life and death within the same gate; only one shall live. Xiansheng said this at Ming Lake three hundred years ago. I’m sure some of you have heard it before, and some have not.”

Yin Biyue had not. He hadn’t been born three hundred years ago; he only vaguely recalled hearing about this prophecy somewhere.

“What does it mean? How should it be interpreted? I’m sure everyone is dying to know, so let’s take it apart tonight!”

Amid the applause, the storyteller never left the crowd in suspense. “Of the twenty-eight constellations in the sky, there is a dragon—Kangjin Long, the Gold-Necked Dragon. It’s the Kang constellation in the seven constellations of the east. As for the serpent, it is the Yi constellation in the seven constellations of the south—Yi Huoshe, the Winged Fire Serpent!”

This wasn’t profound astronomical knowledge. Those who knew a bit about it chimed in, “Correct! Well said!”

“Everyone knows that. Tell us what the two constellations mean!” some prodded.

The storyteller smiled. “Headmaster-xiansheng is a figure of prominence, one who could reckon all heavenly secrets! These constellations clearly refer to people. From the constellation positions in the sky, Gold Necked Dragon and Winged Fire Serpent—the way I see it—correspond to the Cangya Mountains and Baopu Sect. The prophecy points at the eldest disciple of Xihua Peak, Jun Yu, and the chief among Baopu’s Seven, Lin Yuangui. These two are the strongest among the younger generation of their respective sects and naturally fit with Xiansheng’s prophecy.”

The people in the tavern were enjoying themselves, and it never occurred to them that three of Cangya’s disciples would be present. Yin Biyue glanced at his two companions. Duan Chongxuan and Luo Mingchuan hadn’t reacted to the tale so far.

From the first floor, someone hollered, “Hey! We’ve got the clash of the dragon and the serpent, but how do you explain the ‘life and death

within the same gate’?”

Unvexed by the interruption, the storyteller fanned himself. “The ‘gate’ refers to a situation. It means the two will be forced into a situation where they must fight to the death.”

“Oho, you sound so sure,” said the man. “What if you’re wrong?”

“If I’m wrong, come back and I’ll reimburse your tea!” The storyteller laughed heartily.

Everyone knew that was a joke. The tall tales told at Taihe Pavilion were speculation and exaggeration; no one would take them seriously.

The storyteller continued to talk about the past conflicts between the Cangya Mountains and Baopu Sect, eliciting another bout of lively discussion inside the hall. He knew a bit about astrology, and having spent a long time in the chattering crowds of the tavern, he’d picked up various rumors about the sects. As he spoke of them now with measured cadence, raising and lowering his voice to enhance the drama, the audience was enthralled.

Yin Biyue soon lost interest in the tales. Luo Mingchuan noticed and subtly flicked his finger that was resting on his teacup. Instantly, the clamoring noise of the full house could no longer reach them. Even the table nearest would only see three young men having tea in muted silence.

Sensing the air around them shift amid the invisible barrier that enveloped them, Yin Biyue knew that Luo Mingchuan was showing his Breakthrough abilities for the first time. Yin Biyue, comfortable with the extra security, voiced his doubts directly to Duan Chongxuan.

“Is that prophecy…true?”

Yin Biyue knew Duan Chongxuan, who seemed to have an extraordinary background, had his own unique channels for information. Since the matter concerned their elder shixiong, he had to know *something.*

Duan Chongxuan didn't answer directly, but began to tell a story instead.

"Legend has it that three hundred years ago, drinking in the night upon Ming Lake, Xiansheng emptied fourteen jugs of seventy-year-old Drifting Immortal wine. Utterly drunk, he belted a song as he floated in his boat."

Yin Biyue really couldn't imagine the tea-brewing scholar beneath the locust tree singing like a drunkard.

"Starlight spilled onto the lake, and for a hundred miles and more, the rippling surface shimmered," Duan Chongxuan continued. "Xiansheng lifted his gaze to the sky, and amid singing 'Flight of Phoenix,' he added the verses: 'Two stars appear. The dragon and the serpent clash. Life and death within the same gate; only one shall live.' At the end of the song, fog sprang from the lake and lasted deep into the night. It wasn't until the fog had lifted that people realized Xiansheng had received a vision upon the lake and departed with the wind. The prophetic song was recorded and henceforth recited.

"It caused quite a stir at first. Many sects tried to fit their best disciples into the roles of the dragon and the serpent, but there was no evidence of anyone being the right fit. As time went on, the hype died down… Until one year, our shifu brought back Dashixiong. That same year, Lin Yuangui joined Baopu Sect. When the two of them first began to gain fame, the prophecy was brought up again by those with ulterior motives.

Over the years, there have been clues that point to them actually fitting the prophecy, so it's not entirely baseless conjecture.

"Sishixiong, you've been focused on cultivation and haven't ventured into the world, so it's natural that you're not aware. But the story today really isn't anything new. This stuff spread over the Western Continent a long time ago." Duan Chongxuan ended his tale with a sigh.

"Do you believe it?" Yin Biyue asked.

"I don't want it to be true," Duan Chongxuan admitted. "But from what I know, Lin Yuangui's four pillars of destiny align with the Yi constellation. Though they say forcing yourself to glimpse the secrets of the universe can damage your cultivation state, not to mention the universe is unpredictable, Xiansheng was in a state of 'selflessness and otherlessness' when he received that vision. He'd be a hundred times more accurate than divining the future through inference. Besides…why would he lie?"

"What about Dashixiong? Does he know about this?"

Duan Chongxuan nodded. "He should."

Yin Biyue felt a heaviness in his heart. He used to think his elder shixiong carried Xihua Peak's honor, Chunshan Xiao's reputation, and Cangya's safety on his back. Only today had he learned that life and death were yet another set of shackles binding him.

It wasn't that Yin Biyue didn't have confidence in Jun Yu; it was that Lin Yuangui was also very strong. In fact, he could be considered the strongest fighter around, aside from the Second Sage in Baopu Sect. If Xiansheng's prophecy was correct, then what existed between them was no mere rivalry, but a fight to the death. Life and death, two shores of a river forever separated—it was a cruel fate.

Guessing what was on his mind, Duan Chatterbox chuckled. “Sishixiong, you don’t have to be too worried. Shifu is around. He won’t let anything happen to Dashixiong.”

Yin Biyue paused. To be honest, he didn’t have much confidence in his bargain-bin master who hadn’t returned to the peak for centuries.

Luo Mingchuan chuckled as well, and the mood relaxed.

“Sishixiong, do you know what grudge Baopu Sect holds against us?” Duan Chongxuan asked.

Yin Biyue nodded. “Rumor has it that Shifu used the ‘Broad Daylight Sword’ to strike one of Baopu Sect’s elders in the Great Ascension state at Ba River.”

This wasn’t a secret. That attack had lit up the entire Ba River for the whole night. It was so famous that all five continents knew about it.

“In the version spread by Baopu Sect, the Sword Sage acted unreasonably,” Duan Chongxuan said. “They say that when their elder heard the Sword Sage had taken in his first disciple, he just wanted to take a look. Not only was he sent back with insults, he was brutally stripped of his cultivation in retaliation. Do you believe that, Sishixiong?”

“No,” Yin Biyue replied decisively. If the Sword Sage was that kind of person, he wouldn’t have been able to raise disciples with temperaments the likes of Jun Yu and Liu Qishuang.

Duan Chongxuan grinned. “The truth was, Baopu Sect at the time was split into two factions, the old and the new. The new faction advocated for natural cultivation, emphasizing personal enlightenment. The old faction, however, insisted that the fortune of heaven was limited, and that the more the Sword Sage monopolized, the less there was for others. The

emergence of the Sword Sage had already threatened Baopu Sect's dominant position in the Western Continent. That's why they were nervous with the appearance of Dashixiong. They were very worried that Cangya would produce a second Sword Sage in the future."

Yin Biyue could guess how that progressed. Baopu Sect had to have made a move against Jun Yu first.

"The elders of Baopu Sect's old faction, together with the strong fighters of several smaller sects, kidnapped Dashixiong when the Sword Sage wasn't around. Dashixiong was only a child at the time—he couldn't even hold a sword properly—and was taken to the banks of Ba River, where he was used to threaten the Sword Sage to drop his cultivation state. No, not just drop his state. They also demanded that the Sword Sage remove one of his own spiritual meridians."

Yin Biyue was furious listening to this story. Nonetheless, he picked at one of the details. "'They'? So it wasn't one elder from Baopu Sect demanding this?"

A hint of derision flashed in Duan Chongxuan's eyes. "Not just one, but six. Including the people from the other small sects, there were twelve of them in total. They believed that no matter how powerful the Sword Sage was, he couldn't kill so many of them at once. Or rather, that he wouldn't dare to at the cost of his reputation. They believed that the law doesn't punish the masses, that numbers make right."

Yin Biyue guessed how the story played out from there, and he was spot-on.

"It had been so long since someone had attained the Sage state in the world that they forgot the power of a Sage," Duan Chongxuan continued.

“The Sword Sage, using only one attack, killed eleven. He impaired the Baopu Sect elder’s Great Ascension state and spared his life only because Dashixiong was in his hands—he was afraid to hurt him by mistake.

“Baopu Sect has been gravely impacted since then. The new faction knew they were in the wrong, so they didn’t mention the incident again. While the elders from the old faction have died, their disciples remain, and they started to spread word in secret that the Sword Sage was cruel, bloodthirsty, and unreasonable.”

Yin Biyue finally broke into a smile. “A great figure like Shifu would not be burdened by mere reputation.”

It was as though, through this story, the Sword Sage he had never met came alive. He could almost picture the brilliance of that sword strike upon the banks of the surging Ba River. No matter how the world saw him, Yin Biyue thought he was someone worthy of respect.

Duan Chongxuan smiled as well. “Of course our dear old shifu wouldn’t care what those fleas say, so you don’t need to worry too much about it, Sishixiong.” He took a sip of tea and sighed. “If our Shifu had a limit, it would be Dashixiong.”

Chapter 25

OVER THE NEXT MONTH, an influx of visiting cultivators showed up at Ye City. Likewise, the city guards quietly increased in number. Cultivators in various sect uniforms and the ever-present black-armored guards added a touch of solemnity to this bustling and accepting city.

Duan Chongxuan never invited Yin Biyue out at night to listen to stories again—assuming it really had been to listen to stories. Yin Biyue spent his days practicing the Coldwater Blade by the lakeside, and his nights meditating, practicing the sword in his consciousness and strengthening his spiritual mind.

The small lakeside courtyard was very quiet; the hustle and bustle of Ye City did not reach here. If one were to look to the city center instead, there was a constant flow of people. Those in cyan robes adorned with Eight Trigrams runes were members of the Baopu Sect, those in deep-purple long shirts were in the Lianjian Sect, and those in white robes embroidered with clouds were in the Cangya Sect. Of the Buddhists, those in gray monastic robes were from Jiekong Temple, and those in bright-yellow kasaya were from Xingshan Temple.

Walking ahead of the rest were the hosts of this event who were responsible for guiding and receiving guests. They were the disciples of Qinglu Sword Sect, dressed in white robes decorated with splashed-ink landscapes.

He Yanyun followed behind the Xiping Peak elder as they traversed the bustling city streets toward Qiushui Lake in the south district. When she was young, she had often snuck down the mountain, but none of the places

she'd seen were as new and interesting as Ye City. The Qinglu Sword Sect disciples were still around, though. She couldn't look like she didn't get out much; it'd be super embarrassing.

She shot Ruan Xiaolian a look. Ruan Xiaolian returned it.

Let's take a stroll at night to chow down on the good street food.

Let's hit the wonton stall on the left first, then the cold rice cake stall behind it.

The two came to a silent agreement and continued onward without any change in expression.

The disciples of Qinglu Sword Sect let Luo Mingchuan, Yin Biyue, and Duan Chongxuan know their fellow Cangya disciples had arrived. The three welcomed the disciples to the lakeside courtyard complex and greeted Xiping Peak's elder. Then the large group of disciples began to pick their rooms, filling the peaceful lodge with their merry excitement.

Every so often, a disciple would hail the three of them. After saying her hellos, He Yanyun stopped Luo Mingchuan.

"Shixiong, I've got so much to ask you."

Yin Biyue understood her intentions in a heartbeat. *Get him, girl! Your shixiong hasn't met any beautiful female cultivators on the road. Don't you worry.*

Duan Chongxuan turned to Yin Biyue with a smile. "It's quite lively today in the city. Shall we go take a look, Sishixiong?"

What, were they finally going to visit that brothel? The complex was swarming with activity, so there would be no practicing his sword either way. He might as well take a stroll in the city.

The pair had just passed through the affluent residential area when they ran into a spectacle. Any incident in Ye City could be seen from miles away because the black-armored guards were very conspicuous. It just so happened that the center of the commotion were people they knew. A glimpse of a cyan Daoist robe flashed through the gaps in the dense crowd.

Without another word, Duan Chongxuan dragged Yin Biyue through the throng of onlookers and into a teahouse across the street. Choosing a spot by the window on the second floor, he ordered rose pastries and a pot of Junshan Maojian tea before settling comfortably to watch the show.

The spot was perfect; they could even see the quivering fists of the Baopu Sect's disciples clearly. The dozen cyan-robed disciples surrounded by city guards happened to be the same ones Yin Biyue had encountered in Panlong Ridge.

Both groups appeared upset. A couple of black-armored guards were carrying a stretcher with someone lying in it. Acting as the representative for the disciples, He Lai was talking with the captain of the squad.

He radiated the aura of the Breakthrough state and appeared intimidating. If he'd been back at his sect's home, the Hengduan Mountains, no one in the cities and towns in a hundred-mile radius would dare to defy him. But in Ye City, the squad captain of the garrison guards wasn't afraid of him—nor were any of the ordinary folks spectating the scene, for that matter.

At He Lai's cultivation level, he could hear the crowd's whispers, even the distant speakers who kept their voices low.

"And they call themselves a major sect. What kinda manners are those?"

“Baopu Sect? Heh. When Cangya’s group entered the city, they were friendly and didn’t cause any trouble.”

“Yeah. Old Uncle Li at the wonton stall also said that Cangya’s two girlies smiled at him!”

Cangya again. He Lai’s rage blazed listening to the onlookers. That was when the squad captain spoke up.

“According to city laws, damage to private property requires a compensation double the original value. Causing personal injury requires an apology, and the perpetrator is responsible for overseeing the payment of the follow-up treatment.”

Before He Lai could argue, one of the disciples behind him exclaimed, “How have we not paid? Do you know how valuable that bottle of Jade Dew pills is?!”

The squad captain appeared confused. “You have not apologized. This has nothing to do with how valuable the pills are,” he explained.

The Baopu Sect disciples roiled with a mixture of shock, disbelief, and anger. In all their lives, never had they ever experienced anything like this. Apologizing to a strong cultivator was one thing, but they were actually being asked to apologize to a *commoner*? It had only been a collision with a vendor carrying a shoulder pole. The vendor was old; it wasn’t their fault that he had been sent flying so easily. If they hadn’t thought to be more courteous while away from home, they would never have given away such precious medicine!

He Lai was the first to calm down, schooling his expression to one of impassiveness. He wanted to leave this place as soon as possible, instead of standing around surrounded like a circus animal. He gave a careless swipe

of his hems and bent at the waist for a half bow at the stretcher among the black-armored guards.

“Pardon us.”

He Lai didn’t see any of these guards as threats. Thanks to their lower cultivation levels, the guards were inferior in his eyes. But aside from the city master in the Great Ascension state, Ye City had a number of cultivators in the Small Ascension state, and the guards belonged to the city’s administration. He Lai had only just arrived at Ye City, and the Flower-Plucking Tournament hadn’t yet begun. He didn’t want to start anything at a time like this.

“*Now* can we go?” one of the disciples snapped.

The black-armored guards cleanly stepped aside. As the group left, the squad captain shouted after them, “Remember to read the City Laws Handbook when you get to your lodgings!”

The people on the streets snickered behind their hands. A feeling struck He Lai, and he looked up. When he spotted the pair watching from inside the teahouse, his face darkened like a storm cloud.

Duan Chongxuan flashed him an unapologetic smile.

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INSIDE THE SMALL lakeside courtyard where the magnolia tree swayed in the wind, Luo Mingchuan recounted his journey to He Yanyun. He told her of the long embankment in Yang City, of the brigands in Panlong Ridge, the Western Continent’s official road that had led them to

the coast, the lapping waves of the Floating Sea, and Xiansheng's spatial magic embedded in the note.

Finally, toward the end, He Yanyun interrupted him. "Shixiong, that's not what I wanted to hear about!"

Unvexed, Luo Mingchuan asked, "What is it you want to hear about then?"

He Yanyun hesitated, biting her tongue, but that only lasted a moment. She spilled, though she remained vague since she was too embarrassed to be blunt. "I want to know…how things are between you and Yin-shixiong."

Which things? Hmm. The Flower-Plucking Tournament is near, so she's probably asking how our training is going.

Luo Mingchuan smiled. "Quite well. Things are much better than before."

He Yanyun's eyes lit up brilliantly. "I just knew it!"

In her excitement, she flew out of the courtyard like a whirlwind. She needed to tell Ruan Xiaolian the good news right this instant. Their handkerchiefs and banners hadn't been made in vain, *hah*!

"Rest easy, Shixiong! I'll not stand in your way!"

Luo Mingchuan was left standing in her wake, baffled.

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THE NOVELTY OF YE CITY passed swiftly, and on the second day after their arrival, the Cangya disciples began to train, just as they'd always done in the mountains. Qiushui Lake was quiet as always until the day of the Flower-Plucking Tournament's name drawing.

The name drawing took place beside the rings at the foot of Mount Chongming. Every contestant was to write their name upon the Wall of Sunken Shadow and collect a number. Of the 320 contestants, the first 160 people would draw to determine their opponent. No one paid attention to the order in which they would draw lots because whomever they would face depended entirely on luck. The Wall of Sunken Shadow would display the result as soon as a lot was drawn, making any exchange impossible. The hosting Qinglu Sword Sect had also dispatched two elders of the Small Ascension state to maintain order.

Yin Biyue and his two companions happened to be among the first 160, and they stepped forward to draw their lots. They passed through a sea of disciples voicing their reactions to their results.

"Oh, no! I drew a shimei from Lianjian Sect! How can I possibly attack her?" The one speaking actually looked quite pleased.

"I pulled Huiren from Jiekong Temple. A Buddhist cultivator. I've got nothing to worry about. Even if I don't win, I won't get hurt." This one looked relieved.

One who wasn't as lucky was surrounded by his consoling peers. "I'm out! I'm going home! Drawing Zhong Shan on the first round, what terrible luck is that?!"

The line for the drawing moved quickly. The lot tube was large and engraved with an array that prevented the spiritual sense from peeking. Two

elders in the Small Ascension state supervised the drawing. Duan Chongxuan approached and reported his number, then casually drew out a slip. The ink only materialized when he unfolded the paper.

The Wall of Sunken Shadow gleamed with the name that corresponded with the number he had drawn. Beside the wall, the disciple responsible for inscribing the announcement bulletin wrote: *Duan Chongxuan of the Cangya Mountains versus Li Lin of Baopu Sect. Fourth match on the fourth day. Ring number three.*

Yin Biyue hadn't expected that any of the three of them would draw a Baopu Sect member for their first match. Duan Chongxuan's luck was remarkably on point.

Luo Mingchuan was next. Holding his lot, he said hesitantly, "One-eighty-five. I remember this is also a Baopu Sect number."

Sure enough, Wang Zhen of Baopu Sect's name glimmered on the wall.

Yin Biyue didn't like the look of that.

Two in a row. The odds are against us.

Then he was rendered utterly speechless by his own lot.

Yin Biyue of the Cangya Mountains versus He Lai of Baopu Sect. Second match on the eighth day. Ring number one.

"What a small world," Duan Chongxuan marveled.

Chapter 26

THE FIRST ROUND of the Flower-Plucking Tournament took the form of 160 matches that occurred in four rings, with four matches per ring, ending in ten days. It was set up this way because in the first round's matches, the disparity of power between the fighters was greater, resulting in less time required per battle. If a fight exceeded the allotted time, a draw would be awarded, and both contestants advanced to the next round. The second round did not confer draws; matches continued until a winner was decided or someone yielded in defeat.

After the lottery ended, the young cultivators were given a free day to prepare for the upcoming tournament. That day, all of Ye City bubbled with excitement.

Every seat in every teahouse in town was occupied as applause thundered for the storytellers. How the matches would go and what moves or spells the contestants would use were the talk of the streets. Folks chattered with confidence and convincing evidence, as if they had already seen the duels themselves. The braver of the bunch rushed to build straw huts at the foot of Mount Chongming to watch the upcoming competition. The huts were a distance away from the rings, but close enough to hear the fights and see some color flash—enough to make folks excited.

However, the stars of this grand event were not the citizens of Ye City.

The Baopu Sect disciples staying beside Xinshui Bridge in the north district, the disciples of Lianjian Sect staying in the apricot grove in the west district, the Buddhist cultivators staying near Tong'an Canal in the east

district, the disciples of Cangya staying next to Qiushui Lake in the south district, as well as the disciples of various other sects staying downtown in the inns, all reacted differently to the lottery results.

They collected intel and analyzed their opponents' strength and weaknesses, contemplating the moves they would use for their upcoming fights. After they were done worrying about themselves, they couldn't help but worry about their peers.

Everyone knew that the Cangya Mountains and Baopu Sect had a poor relationship. In the lottery for the tournament's first round, aside from Yin Biyue and his two other companions, only Ruan Xiaolian had drawn a disciple from Baopu Sect. She wasn't the one people were most worried about, however.

"The other three matchups at least share similar cultivation levels, but what about Yin-shixiong?" wondered one Cangya disciple, his face long with worry. "Yin-shixiong reached the Spirit Concentration state three years after joining the sect. That certainly is fast. But I hear He Lai from Baopu Sect attained the Breakthrough state six months ago!"

Even though Duan Chongxuan scoffed at the Baopu Seven, their reputation nevertheless preceded them.

"So what if there's a gap in their cultivation levels?!" someone countered immediately. "Yin-shixiong is the Sword Sage's disciple. Jun Yu-shixiong won against a grandmaster in the Great Ascension state when he was still just in Small Ascension!"

The disciple who had spoken had worshipped Jun Yu since joining the Cangya Mountains. At his most obsessed, he had even purposely tried to imitate Jun Yu's dress and the way he held his sword.

However, not everyone viewed the situation with such strong personal feelings. One of the calmer disciples reminded everyone, “Cross-level victories are one in a hundred.”

“But I believe Yin-shixiong will win for certain!” rang the chiming voice of a girl. It was He Yanyun, her face set.

Her confidence was infectious, and others quickly chimed in their support.

“I believe Yin-shixiong will win, too!”

“Yin-shixiong can definitely do this!”

Contrary to the brimming confidence of Cangya’s disciples, the gambling houses in Ye City had set the odds at three to seven, with those betting on Yin Biyue to win standing to lose more.

A rumor was the cause for the steep odds. Somehow, word had started going around that the Sword Sage’s disciple Yin Biyue had qi deviated during sword practice, significantly damaging his cultivation. His black hair turning white was the proof. The rumor had been told so vividly that many sects’ disciples believed it as fact.

Ye City was rich and prosperous and its gambling houses were large. Yet the number of visiting cultivators who gambled there far exceeded that of the locals. Ye City citizens who wanted to gamble had to provide proof of assets before placing any bets to ensure they wouldn’t fall into ruinous debt should they lose. Besides this major rule, there were many other related restrictions and laws. Over time, fewer and fewer locals gambled. Visiting cultivators didn’t need to abide by the gambling laws, but that wasn’t to say they placed bets only for the money. They also wanted to show support for their own sects and bolster their reputations.

Duan Chongxuan walked into the gambling house fanning himself and walked out fanning himself still. When he went in, the odds of Yin Biyue's match were still set at three to seven. When he came out, the odds had shifted to four to six.

"Impossible! How does he have so much money?!"

The Baopu Sect disciples couldn't wrap their heads around this, but they refused to cower. After scraping everything they had together, they found they still didn't have enough to push the odds back in their favor. But the disciples were determined. "Shixiong will definitely win. Even if we borrow money to place our bet, we'll win it back!"

Enlightened, the Baopu Sect disciples went to Ye City's money house and borrowed a hefty sum to bet on He Lai winning.

Yin Biyue was unaware of any of this. He had been in deep meditation simulating his sword techniques in his mind for three days and three nights. In his concentrated state, any talk among the people about whether they had confidence in him could not affect him in the slightest. He had confidence in himself.

It wasn't until the day of Duan Chongxuan's match that Yin Biyue roused from his deep meditation. He changed into Cangya's Daoist robes and straightened his appearance in front of the mirror. When he opened the door, the morning breeze embraced him along with the fragrance of magnolia. He lifted his eyes and happened to lock eyes with Luo Mingchuan, who had been waiting under a tree. Duan Chongxuan stepped out of his room at the same time.

There was not a trace of the nerves that usually preceded a fight on Duan Chongxuan today. He was dressed dashingly and exuded the air of a

noble without unnecessary extravagance. He looked like he was off to a matchmaking date, not a duel.

However, Luo Mingchuan's eyes were fixed on Yin Biyue. The latter was not wearing a cloak over his Daoist robes, and without a hood to cover him, his white hair cascaded down his back.

"Shidi, your…" Luo Mingchuan trailed off, not knowing what to say.

Yin Biyue understood Luo Mingchuan's concern. "I was worried about scaring children on the road before. I'm not ashamed to be seen, so there's no need to hide my face all the time. Now that the Flower-Plucking Tournament has begun, it's only right to be open and honest about it."

Luo Mingchuan felt a pang in his heart when he heard the explanation. His shidi was an exemplary individual. If it weren't for his actions, Yin Biyue would not need to cover up. And he would not have suffered the mockery of Panlong Ridge brigands because of it.

Luo Mingchuan's mind soon calmed, however, as determination washed over him—the Thousand-Leaf Lotus atop Mount Chongming would be his.

The three headed for the outskirts of the city. Mixed in the endless stream of people were the disciples of various sects and city folks attending to watch the spectacle. Yin Biyue's hair color was particularly conspicuous among the crowd. He didn't care whether the stares directed at him were merely speculative or malicious, but Luo Mingchuan did.

He discovered that he became agitated when so many people stared at his shidi. It was strange. He didn't know why he felt that way or what to do about it. Thankfully, contestants were stepping into the ring, and the crowd's attention was soon diverted.

Chapter 27

THE EARLY MORNING SUN was bright and the weather fair, though the morning fog had not yet dispersed from the grounds. The crowds gathered at a wide-open space the Qinglu Sword Sect had cleared, aside from a few straggling elms. Although the tournament was said to take place at the foot of Mount Chongming, the majestic mountain itself loomed some distance away, only faintly visible through the veil of clouds.

Those with a match today had shown up early. The disciples of each sect were settled in the area fifty feet away from the rings separated by a wooden fence. The team-leading elders sat at the front and the rest of the disciples sat behind them. From afar, the four massive rectangular stone stages were surrounded by throngs of uniformed cultivators so distinctly grouped that the sects were immediately recognizable at a glance.

A hundred feet away from the rings were the citizens of Ye City, who had come even earlier than the sects. In fact, to get good seats, they had arrived before the sun was up at the straw huts constructed a few days ago. They had plenty of beverages and snacks and awaited the beginning of the tournament with almost unbearable excitement.

Despite the gathering, the crowd was not at its peak size. Many people missed at least one match in the first round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Even the Qinglu Sword Sect only dispatched an elder that was halfway to the Great Ascension state to preside over the competition for the next several days. Duan Chongxuan wasn’t in the first match, so he waited with Yin Biyue and the others of Cangya Sect behind Elder Cheng of

Xiping Peak and watched the contestants who had just leaped into the four rings.

There really wasn't anything to watch for in the first two matches of the day, as the bouts were between disciples from small sects with little fame who'd barely managed to attain the Spirit Concentration state. As time passed, while the Ye City folks amazed by some firelight and smoke burst into applause, the rest of the elders and disciples below the rings were bored. The only match that might have contained something of interest—Lianjian Sect versus Qinglu Sword Sect—ended in just a few minutes due to the power disparity.

Nonetheless, Yin Biyue watched the matches closely, especially the one with Qinglu Sword Sect. He observed how the fighter activated the might of his sword, how it was brandished, and how it swung to breach the Lianjian Sect disciple's "Defense of the Realms." He scrutinized every step taken and the angle of every flick of the wrist, then simulated in his mind the power that Zhong Shan, someone in the late Breakthrough state, could unleash if he were to use the same techniques.

Just then, there was a commotion among Baopu Sect's team. The group parted into two as a disciple stepped forward. He bowed to his sect elder and didn't forget to nod at He Lai, who stood behind the elder. The elder was wearing a smile so wide his face wrinkled into ripples of folds. He patiently bestowed his instructions to his disciple.

Baopu Sect had also split into two groups when they traveled to Ye City, one led by He Lai and one by the elder, whose group rode in the sect's sky coaster, a flying vessel. This group was different, not because they were stronger than the others, but because they were either kin of Baopu Sect's

elders or juniors from prominent houses. Li Lin was the only son of one of the elders.

The administrator of Qinglu Sword Sect announced: “Ring number three, Duan Chongxuan of the Cangya Mountains versus Li Lin of Baopu Sect…”

His voice, injected with vital qi, resounded far and wide. Excitement coursed through the crowd. The disciples who had been idle perked up.

“Duan Chongxuan? From Xihua Peak? The Sword Sage’s disciple?” someone called out.

Others were quick to offer explanations. “Apparently, he only entered Xihua Peak through the recommendation of Headmaster-xiansheng. The Sword Sage and Xiansheng are good friends, so he couldn’t say no, but Duan Chongxuan is a disciple in name only.”

Before the first person could feel disappointed, someone else added, “But we’ll see the Sword Sage’s real disciple fight in a few days. See the Cangya Mountains group over there? The white-haired one is Yin Biyue. He’s the second sword-wielder under the Sword Sage!”

Discussion for the opposing side was also rampant, as Li Lin’s name was obviously known to some.

“Li Lin? His dad is Baopu Sect’s Li Changhong?”

Someone scrunched up their face. “Honestly, I hate facing his kind of people. He’s got so many good protection items, who knows what he’s got with him. Even people with higher levels of cultivation would have a hard time winning.”

“I heard his mom is also from a major house,” someone else chimed in with a derisive laugh. “And didn’t he have a nickname before he was

eight years old? The ‘Little Bully of the Hengduan Mountains.’ This match is the one to watch today, no doubt about it.”

Li Lin leaped onto the ring, scanned across the crowd below until his eyes stopped at Cangya’s group, and smirked. It was an unpleasant smile that dripped with arrogance and contempt.

The present him was not the “Little Bully of the Hengduan Mountains” of the past. He stood six feet tall with prominent muscles and dark golden skin. Though his features had once been quite even, due to many years of slanting his eyes in haughty, sidelong glances and pursing his lips in contempt, his face was quite crooked. However, his large build, coupled with the heavy sword strapped on his back, gave him a formidable presence. He peered down at the crowd with disdain.

Duan Chongxuan patted the hems of his robes and sauntered into the ring. He wore Cangya’s Daoist robes today, though they were still not the same as the others’ uniforms. The fabric of his clothes was smooth, luxurious, and sewn with exquisite craftsmanship. The cloud pattern that adorned the cuffs moved and flowed with his stride, the silk shimmering with every step. His hair was drawn up with a jade crown and his waist was cinched with a silver belt that accentuated his broad shoulders and thin waist. He looked tall and elegant. His refined demeanor didn’t particularly stand out when he was next to Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan, but when he stood opposite Li Lin, the contrast was akin to the one between clouds in the sky and clods of dirt.

The feisty female cultivators of Lianjian Sect were the first to go wild, screaming up a storm until the Lianjian Sect elder shot them a death glare. When they snapped out of it, they realized they had embarrassed

themselves, but that didn’t stop them from whispering among themselves with red cheeks.

“Where does he live?”

“How many people are in his family?”

“Is he single?”

Yin Biyue stared. Could he have made a mistake? Was Duan Chatterbox the real protagonist? Based on the way he carried his own halo as soon as he entered the scene… Or was it because the ladies of Lianjian Sect judged value based on looks?

Up in the ring, the two fighters exchanged a salute. Li Lin’s bow was halfhearted, while Duan Chongxuan’s was flawless. When he straightened, he pointed at his opponent with his folding fan.

“Please enlighten me, my friend.” His tone had been the same when he had yielded the road to Baopu Sect.

His manners had obviously fired up the female cultivators of Lianjian Sect. However, the spectating elders did not see Duan Chongxuan favorably. The two fighters were at similar cultivation levels, so it was unwise to give up the first opportunity to strike. They saw this not as confidence, but as arrogance. The Baopu Sect disciples jeered.

Li Lin didn’t comment. He wasn’t foolish; he wouldn’t decline the offer out of gentlemanly manners. Duan Chongxuan’s actions just made him laugh. Without further ado, he drew his sword and slashed down. A streak of golden light flashed from the ring. His was a thousand-pound heavy sword. The blade was engraved with intricate runes of array magic that, when he injected his vital qi, beamed brightly and increased the power

of his strikes threefold. His attack was straightforward and relied only on the outpouring of an immense amount of vital qi.

Someone below the stage recognized the worth of Li Lin's weapon and exclaimed in awe, "That sword is the real deal!"

The crafting of such a sword required five years of dedication from a master swordsmith and a master runecarver who were both in the Small Ascension state. This alone made it obvious how much Li Changhong doted on his only son, and what high hopes he'd placed on him.

The female cultivators of Lianjian Sect watched with bated breath, as if the young man facing such a powerful strike was their friend or family.

Yin Biyue was suddenly seized by worry. Now that he thought about it, he'd never seen the chatterbox train. If he had been the one to meet this strike, he wouldn't take it head-on. The best way to repel it would be to use the third stance of the Coldwater Blade and turn defense into offense… No, what was he thinking? He would never let Li Lin strike first! The best way to fight such a fast and ferocious strike would be to move faster than the opponent.

Not just Yin Biyue, but many present were thinking the same thing. If it were them, how would they parry this attack?

To their surprise, a blazing wall of fire appeared in front of Duan Chongxuan.

"He's a spiritual cultivator? What magic is that? It's so fast!"

"No, he didn't make any hand seals. There's not a bit of vital qi rippling at all!"

Someone with a sharp eye shouted, "It's not magic, it's a fire talisman!"

“A fire talisman? Are you sure?!”

Yin Biyue relaxed. He knew about Duan Chongxuan’s fire talismans. He had used one to clean out the caves they’d stayed in. The talismans were quite handy and made no smoke or ash. Yin Biyue had been shocked at first, even though the flames then had been far from the current size.

In the Age of Sages, cultivators’ usage of talismans had been as commonplace as meditation. At the time, the power of talismans could cleave mountains. However, hundreds of thousands of years later during the Age of Spiritual Decline, the art of talisman-making had been lost. Presently, cultivators proficient in rune magic could only engrave spells on weapons. They were far from able to condense immense power upon a thin sheet of talisman paper.

Occasionally, a talisman with its magic still intact would be discovered in an ancient ruin, but its price on the black market was always hyped to an unfathomable sum. Even as the crowd witnessed the fire talisman with their own eyes, many still refused to believe it was real because of this.

Li Lin tugged a black shield from his qiankun sleeve[27] and dispersed the flames, though cracks crawled across the shield’s surface after the impact. Without missing a beat, he slashed again with his sword. The apparition of an Eight Trigrams array manifested from the attack’s golden light and slammed toward Duan Chongxuan. The crowd went wild.

“Baopu’s Eight Trigrams Sword!”

The elder of Baopu Sect smiled. He’d recognized that Duan Chongxuan’s move had been the manifestation of a fire talisman, but so what? To waste a precious talisman in the tournament’s first round was the action of

an unskilled man—or a stupid one. Neither were a cause for concern. Was he going to take out a second talisman? A third one? Nonsense.

Then the elder's smile froze.

A slip of yellowed talisman paper appeared at the tip of Duan Chongxuan's finger and fluttered in the cool summer breeze. The blaze grew and barreled upward, devouring Li Lin's attack in a flash. Duan Chongxuan had slowed down during his attack, allowing everyone in the audience to see his move clearly. The audience blew up.

"That really is a fire talisman. He has two of them!"

"Dear heaven above, how much could they have cost?!"

"Three thousand gold, eight hundred spirit stones, seventy dan of East Sea mermaid pearls, a grand estate in the best feng shui location…"

Li Lin's eyes widened in disbelief. He had a talisman as well, a last contingency item his father had given him. He'd never imagined his opponent would use two talismans just like that—and now the raging fire was nearing the tips of his eyebrows. Without hesitation, he hurled out a giant bell.

"The Twilight Crow Bell! Now that's a good item…"

But with the fire talisman already in play, his rare defensive spiritual device didn't cause much of a stir. Aside from the pain of parting with a treasure, Li Lin was furious. His abundant wealth in spiritual devices had always been his greatest advantage, and he refused to believe Duan Chongxuan could have many more talismans. When Duan Chongxuan used them all up, he would slay him.

The golden light of his sword reflected in his bloodshot eyes—he'd already lost his composure. Thus, the following scene repeated itself over

and over: Li Lin lunged and Duan Chongxuan nonchalantly flung out a talisman, dispelling the strike and draining the power from one of the spiritual devices Li Lin had unleashed.

The spectating cultivators were stupefied by the fight. The Cangya disciples and the female cultivators of Lianjian Sect forgot to laugh and chatter, and even Baopu Sect forgot to curse. The Ye City folks watching the competition in the distance celebrated louder and louder each time they watched the towering fire that seemed to devour the ring.

The Qinglu Sword Sect elder who was halfway into the Great Ascension state focused his mind and began to divine. Soon his face paled.

Before anyone realized it, the matches in the other three rings stopped. No one said a word about it, either. Everyone, both inside and outside the rings, was watching as one fire talisman after another flew into the air.

Raging fire burst out of nothing, again and again. Faced with the billowing flames, Li Lin was engulfed by surging rage. Once more, fire barreled toward him. He braced with his sword and hurried backward, but it was too late. The fire coiled around the tip of his sword and surged along the blade.

The sword’s momentum was draining his vital qi at flying speed, and his spiritual devices were all damaged by the fire talismans. Li Lin struggled on, his temper flaring, until a curtain of cold water appeared before him.

He had hurled out his water talisman—the contingency his dad had left him. The last spiritual device he had.

He looked up to see Duan Chongxuan fanning his folding fan and smiling. Shock hit Li Lin like a bucket of cold water. He realized that every inch of his spiritual meridian ached like it'd been burnt. The scalding was caused by the depletion of his vital qi from relentless sword attacks—if he continued to fight, he would sustain internal injuries.

Fire roared to life again, and Li Lin tumbled out of the ring.

The enraged Baopu Sect disciples came to their senses and spouted curses. "Relying purely on talismans in a duel is shameless! Absolutely shameless!"

If they'd been the ones to overpower others with their spiritual devices, they would have been proclaiming the profound wealth of their sect. However, since the tactic was used to crush them, they were sullen as could be.

Duan Chongxuan chuckled. The towering elm beside the ring rustled in the gentle breeze, bathing him in dappling light. It looked as if there had been no duels here, nor any streaks of golden light or raging fires. Only a fine, graceful young noble whose easy smile was as gentle as a cool breeze swirling around the bright moon in an embrace.

Breezily, he asked, "How could such a man be worth my effort?"

Before the disciples of the Cangya Mountains could shout their jubilation, screams erupted from Lianjian Sect.

"Duan-shixiong! Duan-shixiong!"

"Look over here, Duan-shixiong!"

"Are you single, Duan-shixiong?!"

This time, not even the death glares from Lianjian Sect's elder could suppress their frenzy.

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MANY YEARS LATER, Duan Chongxuan would become a prominent figure, and this ridiculous match would enter the history books with the description "Unconventional." But at the moment, no one was using such subtle or implicitly complimentary terms. At the foot of Mount Chongming and in the marketplaces of Ye City, whenever the match was mentioned, most would comment: "Unbelievable," "Was it real?" and…

"He's *too* rich."

Duan Chongxuan had invented a new style of combat at the Flower-Plucking Tournament.

Chapter 28

ON THIS peaceful, tranquil morning, as Duan Chongxuan strolled down the street, someone pushed open their window and shrieked in excitement.

"Young Master Duan is *here*!"

Duan Chongxuan's fanning hand turned clammy with cold sweat.

A great clamor erupted and clouds of dust kicked up as maidens—lifting their long skirts and waving their handkerchiefs—tore down the stairs of their pavilions, whether from the back streets or inns, in a flurry of perfumes and silk. In the blink of an eye, both sides of the street were flooded by the ladies. Some had painted on delicate plum-blossom makeup matched with hairpins of golden pearls, while others had just risen and hadn't had the time to paint their faces, so they were wearing silk veils and their hair was loose. Regardless of their looks, they stared transfixed at Duan Chongxuan, their eyes shining with an unknown fire.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan unconsciously sped up to get away from him.

"Wait for me, you two!" Duan Chongxuan quickened his pace to keep up.

This was Yin Biyue's first time seeing such a scene, and he was a little stunned by the madness. "Your reputation's spread this far already?"

The gathering comprised the ladies of Ye City. The female cultivators from Lianjian Sect wouldn't go this far.

Since Duan Chongxuan's return from his match that day, Qiushui Lake had become a bustling place. Different girls would "happen" to pass by every day to admire the lakeside landscape. Every morning, outside the gates of the small courtyard the three were staying in, piles of handkerchiefs and handsewn perfume pouches appeared.

The other Cangya disciples were elated by seeing so many beautifully dressed girls every day. Their backs were no longer sore, their legs no longer ached, and they were pumped full of energy during sword practice.

A thought had occurred to Yin Biyue, however. What if one day one of the girls turned evil and threw a lightning ball at them? To mitigate this potential danger—namely a flying projectile from above—he installed a simple protection array using the flags Yan Xing had left behind. The atmosphere had improved afterward.

"Sorry for all the trouble…" Duan Chongxuan smiled sheepishly.

Luo Mingchuan flashed him a reluctant, resigned smile in return. "It's not your fault."

When Yin Biyue looked at the embroidered handkerchief flapping in the wind hung over their courtyard wall, his mouth twitched. "Are you still going out today?"

Of the sixteen matches in today's tournament, Cangya disciples were fighting in four, among which was Luo Mingchuan versus Baopu Sect. Duan Chongxuan would've gone without a doubt in the past. Now, as soon as he stepped out the door, the passionate gazes of the maidens outside glued onto him, hot enough to burn holes in his robes.

Duan Chongxuan stiffened, as though an unpleasant experience was on his mind. He gritted his teeth against the discomfort. "Yes! Why

wouldn’t I?!”

Almost all of Cangya’s disciples would be watching the competition today, as there were a number of matches involving their sect. The three followed the massive crowd out.

The breakfast stalls on the streets opened at daybreak. Vapor from steaming baskets and white fog mingled in the air before the morning breeze dispersed both. Restaurant waiters opened the windows on the second floor, set down the benches and chairs, and hung the colorful banners of their businesses. In the empty, quiet long street, the cries and clicks of cicadas could occasionally be heard.

“Don’t be nervous. Just do your best,” He Yanyun told Ruan Xiaolian in a low voice while patting her shoulder. “We’ll feast on Taihe Pavilion’s roasted chicken afterward!”

Several other disciples surrounded them and encouraged Ruan Xiaolian in quiet voices, providing her with a slew of ideas.

These same disciples weren’t worried at all about Luo Mingchuan, whose match was also today. They never said *Luo-shixiong is so powerful, he’ll definitely win*, but they couldn’t imagine a scenario where he would lose. It was a baffling sort of confidence, one that was entirely unreasonable, yet Luo Mingchuan was the kind of man who inspired such thoughts in Cangya’s disciples.

Yin Biyue glanced at Luo Mingchuan beside him. He was the same as always. His steps were steady and his expression neither overly solemn nor contemptuous. He still wore his simple yet dignified Cangya Daoist robe, every detail—from his tied hair to the collar—meticulously neat. Whether he was walking along the rugged mountain paths of Cangya or Ye

City’s long streets that led to a duel, his demeanor remained unchanged, giving the illusion of eternal constancy.

Although Luo Mingchuan did not put on airs, he looked proper with a trace of solemnity—obviously a man of noble stature, clueless to romance. Yin Biyue, meanwhile, was white-haired, dour, and obviously unfriendly. In contrast, a small smile always played on Duan Chongxuan’s lips, giving him the look of a dashing young master. As his talkative nature hadn’t yet been exposed, he was the most pleasing to a young maiden of sixteen. Thus, in Ye City, almost every girl would say: “Jade crowned, white robed, landscape fanned—which gongzi fanned the hearts of Ye City?”

Fortunately, after reaching the tournament grounds two miles out of the city where Qinglu Sword Sect’s disciples were on guard, the girls couldn’t come closer. Knowing Duan Chongxuan had no matches that day, they reluctantly left. Yin Biyue heard the chatterbox heave a long sigh of relief.

The crowd below the rings today was visibly larger because two of the matches were particularly worthy of attention. Both Luo Mingchuan and Zhong Shan were set to take the stage today. Overwhelming victory for them was a foregone conclusion, but many wanted to watch how they would fight and what rhythm they’d bring to their duels. Qinglu Sword Sect’s disciples were especially large in number, surrounding the two fighters in great fanfare like stars encircling the moon.

Yin Biyue gazed far into the distance and noticed someone familiar. It was Junior Sect Leader Song, whom they’d encountered on the northern outskirts of Ye City. He was talking to a man beside him who had a longsword hanging from his waist.

Indeed, at first glance, it wasn't the man's face or figure Yin Biyue noticed but his sword. It was as if the sword possessed the peculiar power of attracting the undivided attention of every sword cultivator in the area.

Duan Chongxuan leaned in close to whisper, "The man beside Song Tang is Zhong Shan."

Just then, Zhong Shan happened to lift his eyes. In that split second, his piercing gaze flew through the crowds and the rings and struck like lightning on Yin Biyue. Almost out of an instinct for danger, Yin Biyue's vital qi surged forth. His sleeves billowed from the force, and every muscle in his body pulled taut with tension. He was ready to draw his sword at any moment.

Duan Chongxuan, the one closest to him, subconsciously stepped back.

Abruptly, a white-robed back blocked Yin Biyue's vision—and Zhong Shan's gaze. Luo Mingchuan had stood in front of him. It had taken him just a few steps forward, easy as a breeze, but the simple act had shielded Yin Biyue.

Luo Mingchuan openly met Zhong Shan's eyes.

Song Tang seemed to have sensed something and turned his eyes to follow Zhong Shan's gaze, only to find Luo Mingchuan and a group of Cangya's disciples. Song Tang gave a nod, which Luo Mingchuan returned.

The bell rang, signaling the start of the tournament. Every sect returned to their spots as if that exchange hadn't occurred. It'd taken mere moments for Zhong Shan to look over and for Luo Mingchuan to exchange greetings with Song Tang. No one else had noticed.

However, the moment was etched in Yin Biyue's mind. He could now be certain that Zhong Shan, who was at his peak in the Breakthrough state, was well on his way to reaching Small Ascension. His regard had carried undisguised scrutiny and animosity even though this was their first meeting.

But Yin Biyue's attention was soon diverted when Luo Mingchuan walked toward the ring.

"Luo Mingchuan of the Cangya Mountains versus Wang Zhen of Baopu Sect…" came the sonorous announcement, coupled with an eruption of hollering from the Cangya disciples. The Baopu Sect disciples, meanwhile, looked gloomy.

"Leave the ring of your own volition after exchanging a few moves," He Lai said to Wang Zhen. "Don't lose too badly and embarrass the sect."

Wang Zhen had always followed He Lai's lead. He had no objection whatsoever to the instruction. "Yes, Shixiong."

Truth be told, he also thought matching with the chief disciple of the Cangya Mountains was rotten luck. He didn't plan on throwing more punches than he had to—that'd be absurd. He had already decided how he would gracefully yield after exchanging a couple blows, to act as if he was magnanimous for not fighting. Even though admitting defeat meant losing face, it was better than being thrown out of the ring.

With that plan in mind, he stepped into the ring. After they saluted each other, he raised his voice. "I have long heard of the great reputation of Cangya's chief disciple. I am truly in awe of your profound cultivation, and I know myself to be no match!"

Wang Zhen's speech hinted to Luo Mingchuan that his cultivation and status were both higher than his, so it wouldn't be a glorious victory if

he won. He also figured that Luo Mingchuan wouldn't be as heavy-handed now out of courtesy.

Luo Mingchuan didn't respond. He simply smiled in acceptance of the other's praise.

Yin Biyue felt he was more focused than the two in the ring. He wanted to see how Luo Mingchuan would attack. The Ghara Pupil Technique? No, that was either a contingency or a finishing move; he wouldn't use it so early on. Crush his opponent directly with sheer vital qi? That would be brutish. Use spells that controlled the vitality of plants? Yin Biyue glanced at the large elm beside the stone platform. That seemed the most likely.

All eyes were focused on the match. Under the gaze of thousands, Luo Mingchuan grasped his sword. It caught everyone by surprise.

"What's going on? Luo-shixiong still uses his sword?"

"So…that sword isn't just for show?"

Unlike the others, what Yin Biyue noticed was Luo Mingchuan's odd grip—and that Chenzhou remained sheathed. Luo Mingchuan was holding the sheathed Chenzhou level with his chest as though he was holding a long rod. What was he thinking?

Luo Mingchuan's opponent Wang Zhen was about to find out.

Without warning, Wang Zhen drew his sword and lunged. A spinning Eight Trigrams image appeared where the tip of his sword pierced through the air. He used his most reliable and most practiced style: Baopu's Eight Trigrams Sword!

However, before his sword's momentum came within three feet of his opponent, Luo Mingchuan moved. He raised his still-sheathed sword high

and brought it down heavily—like a bludgeon to the head. The blow knocked aside Wang Zhen's sword, broke through his vital qi shield, and struck him directly on the right shoulder.

Crack!

Everyone below the ring heard the clear sound of bones breaking.

The blow had been so fast and so brutal that it caught everyone off guard, yet it had been delivered so honestly and without a hint of malice that it felt as if the strike was an inevitable response.

Luo Mingchuan's figure blurred. Mere moments later, he reappeared behind Wang Zhen and delivered a second strike. Wang Zhen swung his sword backward only to hit Luo Mingchuan's sheath. Wang Zhen's vital qi rippled, disturbed, and his sword slipped out of his hand. In the same breath, Luo Mingchuan's sword came down for a third time, hitting Wang Zhen squarely in the spine.

Yin Biyue was astonished beyond belief.

Someone below the ring finally recognized the move and yelled out the answer: "Lanyuan Academy's disciplinary whip!"

Some disciples in the throng had also come out of the academy, and when they looked closer, they agreed. "It's true! That's the disciplinary whip right there!"

Yin Biyue didn't know how to feel. He hadn't expected Luo Mingchuan would choose this method to duel.

The academy's disciplinary whip wasn't actually a whip style but a disciplinary action performed by teachers on unruly students. They didn't need to use whips. When they encountered rule-breaking, ungovernable students, they'd just as easily grab a locust branch or use bamboo sticks.

Oftentimes, a wooden rod was used to realize the true meaning of the disciplinary whip.

Yin Biyue grasped what was happening now. Luo Mingchuan was using his sword as a rod. Back when they were at the academy, the teacher who had taught Debates was getting on in years and hadn’t the energy, so he’d asked his most mature and dependable student, Luo Mingchuan, to wield the whip on his behalf. Lashing a student was a task that made enemies, but Luo Mingchuan was so fair and honorable in his executions that no one harbored resentment toward him.

“In the name of the teacher, I will punish you.” This was the essence of the disciplinary whip.

As a teacher disciplining the student, of course it was within his right. It was justified. Except Luo Mingchuan wasn't Wang Zhen's master, which made the beating insulting—*I will punish you on your master's behalf.*

The Baopu Sect elder's face turned stormy.

Chapter 29

ONCE LUO MINGCHUAN'S ATTACK was revealed to be Lanyuan Academy's disciplinary whip, many read the underlying meaning. Unable to dodge, Wang Zhen took five hits in a row, feeling so much pain it was as if his bones had all shattered. Luo Mingchuan was attacking too fast, leaving him no time to speak. But if this kept up, he could sustain severe internal injuries…

Wang Zhen gritted his teeth hard. Throwing his and his sect's dignity out the window, he was just about to shout "Yield!" when he paled and felt cold sweat drench his skin.

He couldn't speak.

Distracted and distressed, he let another blow strike him, and his back screamed with pain.

The audience could only see Luo Mingchuan moving faster and faster, the blur of his heavy blows forming a large net that enveloped his opponent. Wang Zhen was flabbergasted, his eyes bulging in disbelief, yet he couldn't utter a single word. He had no sword in his hand, and his vital qi was already depleted from his fight to survive the rod. At this point, he could only duck pathetically—except even when Luo Mingchuan stopped channeling his vital qi and started fighting purely with martial arts, Wang Zhen couldn't dodge fast enough.

Yin Biyue thought this fight fishy. There was no reason he could see that Wang Zhen wouldn't just admit defeat already.

Then he remembered that one of the many strikes of the disciplinary whip was meant to seal off the airflow of the throat to prevent punished students from disrupting order with their yelling. The move was similar to the “Silence” spell. However, it had been abolished three hundred years ago. No one used it now. If Yin Biyue hadn’t pored through thousands of texts in the Hall of Night Study, which contained the history of the academy, he would never have known about it.

Luo Mingchuan’s disciplinary whip was harder, harsher, and truer to the spirit of the punishment than what the academy currently used to keep students in line. But no one in the audience knew. Aside from marveling at Luo Mingchuan’s vast knowledge—unsurprising that he knew the moves, since he had studied at the academy—only a few noticed Wang Zhen’s state.

“I can’t believe that guy’s got such grit. He’s not yielding even when injured like that?”

As soon as Wang Zhen’s peers heard that compliment, one of the older disciples scoffed. “What does that matter? He’s a fool! Fighting over *pride*. If he hurt his spiritual meridian, how will he pursue his cultivation? Don’t imitate him.”

The rest of the group nodded in agreement, but they were in the minority. Many disciples from other sects knew Luo Mingchuan as the elder shixiong of the Cangya Mountains and had an excellent impression of him.

“That guy should admit his defeat. The longer he drags it out, the longer Luo-shixiong has to beat him. How exhausting!”

“Luo-shixiong is so generous. He knows his opponent doesn’t have any power to fight. Look, he’s not even using his vital qi in his attacks.”

A few of these comments drifted into the ears of Baopu Sect, and despite their anger and indignation, they were also incredulous.

The rings were shielded with a protection array to prevent the overflow of vital qi from harming the audience, as well as isolation barriers to stop strong individuals from interfering and influencing the matches. Only the host, Qinglu Sword Sect, could manipulate the arrays in case of emergencies to avoid serious casualties.

In the current situation, Luo Mingchuan had stopped channeling vital qi, and Wang Zhen was only suffering flesh wounds. He was at no risk of fatal harm. Since Wang Zhen refused to yield, the elder overseeing the match had no reason to intervene. The first round of the tournament had a time limit after all. The winner would be declared once time was up.

He Lai had a feeling something was wrong. He and Wang Zhen had come to an agreement before the latter went into the ring. He studied Wang Zhen’s face carefully and a possibility dawned on him. Wang Zhen *couldn’t* yield in defeat! He Lai’s face fell.

Yin Biyue also found the situation odd. Logically, to silence his opponent was not an honest approach, and it went against the way of the gentleman. Then he heard Duan Chatterbox chuckle.

The chatterbox shuffled closer. “Sishixiong, the first to spread the rumor about your cultivation being damaged because of qi deviation was Wang Zhen.” After their journey together, Duan Chongxuan’s hostility toward Luo Mingchuan had dissipated. “He wouldn’t mind his tongue before, so Luo-shixiong wants to make sure he can’t speak up anymore.”

Yin Biyue suddenly recalled what Luo Mingchuan had said at Panlong Ridge: *"There will be times when we must draw our swords."*

Luo Mingchuan was not a total bleeding-heart. He had his principles and his methods—he wouldn't abuse his power to bully others, nor would he allow himself to be bullied. Truly, he embodied the idea that "A gentleman knows what to do and what not to do."

Yin Biyue's previous understanding of Luo Mingchuan had been far too simplistic.

At long last, as if he'd spent every ounce of his energy, Wang Zhen cried out, his voice hoarse, "I yield—!"

At the same time, the bell rang. The administrative disciple of Qinglu Sword Sect announced, "Time is up. This match is over. Winner—Luo Mingchuan of the Cangya Mountains."

Luo Mingchuan stayed his hand and leaped down from the ring. Baopu Sect disciples immediately rushed up to carry out the black-and-blue Wang Zhen. This duel had begun in an unexpected way and ended equally so.

The Cangya disciples didn't cause a ruckus again. Perhaps it was because the other side looked too miserably battered, or they were influenced by Luo Mingchuan's gentlemanly bearing. Regardless of the reason, they showcased the manners befitting a major sect: courteous and polite, cool in the face of both favor and disgrace. Nonetheless, a reserved yet proud smile hung on everyone's face, as if they shared in the triumph.

It was precisely this behavior—acting as if victory was the most natural outcome—that the Baopu Sect found even more humiliating and frustrating than cheers.

He Lai, however, had calmed. He remembered his match with Yin Biyue the next day. It was excellent timing. Since the moment he'd stepped foot in Ye City to the duels of the past few days, whether it be Duan Chongxuan or Luo Mingchuan, both filled him with overflowing rage. It felt as if a fire burned inside of him that would grow to immolate him if it remained unvented.

A commotion erupted on Qinglu Sword Sect's side. Zhong Shan was about to enter the ring, and his presence pulled everyone's attention his way.

Zhong Shan's opponent was an unknown disciple who hailed from a remote place in the Southern Continent. He was more defeated than he was nervous; aside from his frustration with his bad luck, he seemed to have accepted his fate.

Rather than the disciple's reaction, the crowd was more concerned with Zhong Shan's performance. Quiet descended upon the tournament grounds; people were worried that the smallest distraction would have them miss Zhong Shan's attack.

On the Southern Continent, never mind the other four continents, not many had personally met Zhong Shan. Despite his immense renown, he did not have an eye-catching appearance. Maybe it was because the sword that hung at his waist was so dazzling that it overpowered its wielder's brilliance.

Gazing at him, Yin Biyue only noticed his straight, linear brows, and his thin, pallid lips. Yet he couldn't forget those lightning-sharp eyes that had pierced him this morning. This was a dangerous man.

The two fighters stood in the ring. When the unknown disciple met Zhong Shan's eyes, he suddenly screamed, "I CONCE—"

A loud rumble echoed through the ring.

Immediately following the large noise, the figure of a person shot into the air before crashing into a heap at the edge of the ring. His landing raised a cloud of dust, while blood spewed past his lips from a blow to his midriff.

The sword Fengyu had caused injury without being unsheathed.

It happened so fast. By the time the crowd registered the attack, Zhong Shan had already descended from the ring and left, heading back to the city and not Qinglu Sword Sect. No one called out to stop him. It was silent both in and out of the ring.

Yin Biyue's expression grew solemn. He saw what had struck Zhong Shan's opponent first wasn't the vital qi around the scabbard but the overflowing sword qi.

The strike had seemed indifferent, relying solely on superior cultivation and violent vital qi to cause harm. What made Yin Biyue wary was the level of sword art Zhong Shan had exhibited. He was lightning fast with perfect control.

The other three rings hadn't even finished their opening salutes by the time Zhong Shan's match was over. The administrative disciple began to prepare for the next duel to take place in the ring.

"Ruan Xiaolian of the Cangya Mountains versus Zhou Yue of Baopu Sect…"

Ruan Xiaolian flashed He Yanyun a reassuring smile and lifted her skirt to walk into the ring. She took her place just as the crowds recovered

from the shock of Zhong Shan's match.

Carrying no weapons and wearing a white dress with a silver belt and frost-colored slippers, Ruan Xiaolian looked like a delicate white lotus shivering in the cold wind. Compared to the vibrant and bold female cultivators of Lianjian Sect, her daintiness caught the attention of many male disciples. Even the usually reserved and taciturn Qinglu Sword Sect began to whisper among themselves.

Her opponent grinned. Zhou Yue had been worried when he first drew the Cangya Mountains from the lot pot, especially when he heard his opponent was similar in cultivation level. But when he saw his match was a frail girl, he congratulated himself on his good luck.

After the two exchanged a salute, Zhou Yue opened his mouth in an attempt to flirt. "Shimei…"

Before he could even utter a whole sentence, a fist—powered by immense vital qi—came slamming toward his face. Startled by the rapid punch that materialized mere inches from his skull, Zhou Yue drew his sword and frantically stepped back.

Many had assumed that since both competitors were at similar cultivation levels, the match would drag on for a long time. They watched in stunned silence as the delicate white lotus pummeled the much larger man using her bare fists, each punch landing with brutal force. Under the barrage, Zhou Yue couldn't make a move at all.

"Xiaolian practices the 'Mountain-Flipping Fist.' As if she'd be intimidated by flashy, insubstantial sword techniques!" He Yanyun couldn't stop herself from crowing.

Duan Chongxuan softly cleared his throat and said to Yin Biyue, “It’s similar to Ershijie’s ‘Thunder Fist’…”

Yin Biyue could also see it now. Ruan Xiaolian might not have an advantage against many others, but Zhou Yue’s sword style relied on clever tricks. His moves were intricate, but he hadn’t mastered them thoroughly. Unfortunately for him, he had run into someone like Ruan Xiaolian, who believed in one overwhelming brute force attack to defeat all techniques. Being beaten to a pulp was his only fate.

Some of the disciples from Qinglu Sword Sect had turned their heads away, unable to watch the match any further. Of course it wasn’t only because Zhou Yue was getting walloped, but because they didn’t know how to face Ruan Xiaolian, who had rolled up her sleeves as the fight continued on.

Yin Biyue felt for them. The devastating blow of having the image of your idol shattered was akin to qi deviation.

As the sun dipped in the western horizon, the faint thump of the evening drum inside the city sounded from a distance. A few birds, mere dots in the sky, were on their way back to their nests. Another day of the Flower-Plucking Tournament matches had come to an end.

As the juniors of the cultivation world retired for the night, some discussed in excited voices what they had learned from watching the matches today, while others listened to words of encouragement from their peers as they worried about their own matches. They eventually scattered in different directions. Yet they all walked with conviction, even if their hearts were filled with unease and anticipation for the future. The setting sun cast

long shadows, but rather than feeling suspenseful, it highlighted their exuberance.

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As the tournament continued, some sects rejoiced, and some sects grieved. As of today, the Cangya Mountains' advancement rate had been fairly decent, upholding their top spot in the One Mountain and Three Daoist Sects. As for Luo Mingchuan and Zhong Shan's matches, the ordinary Ye City folks hadn't known the significance of what they saw and were even a little disappointed by the lack of chills and thrills. Nevertheless, for cultivators, those two matches had held great importance.

Zhong Shan had lived up to his reputation—even when his sword Fengyu remained sheathed, his presence had been formidable. The other match, on the other hand, provided more fodder for conversation.

News about the tournament spread quickly, so from Ye City to the entire Southern Continent, everyone knew Cangya's chief disciple Luo Mingchuan had *disciplined* a Baopu Sect disciple. At these remarks, the Baopu Sect disciple desperately countered with: "Cangya has always been full of bullies. Do they actually think we've no talent in our sect? He-shixiong will be fighting the Sword Sage's disciple tomorrow! We'll show *them* what manners from a major sect look like!"

The Baopu Sect had brought twenty-eight participants to the tournament, and five had already been eliminated in the first round. Compared to smaller sects, this advancement rate was quite high. However,

Baopu Sect had always considered themselves to be on par with the Cangya Mountains. The difference in advancement rate made them seem inferior. More importantly, the incidents of the past few days had left them deeply infuriated. This made the match against Yin Biyue the next day significant. It was not just He Lai—every Baopu Sect disciple felt a burning rage in their chest demanding an outlet.

As the match approached, He Lai seemed calm on the surface, but deep down, his excitement was growing. Tomorrow, he would gain fame for defeating the Sword Sage's disciple. How could he not look forward to it?

In the small lakeside courtyard, under the magnolia tree, Yin Biyue also found tranquility. Tomorrow would be his first fight after descending the mountain and entering the secular world. Many might come to watch him, but he didn't see it as anything special. He had observed many duels in recent days, and his fighting spirit was at its peak. He needed a match to test the insights he'd gained. That was all.

Chapter 30

SUMMER WAS IN FULL SWING. The elms lining the main avenue of Ye City grew lush and dense, and the constant cries of cicadas filled the air. On the streets, the young ladies' clothing rustled in thin layers, their fair-as-lotus-root arms veiled by green sheer robes draped over strapless long dresses. Street stalls had started selling honey-glazed cold rice dumplings and sesame-paste cold noodles, and the vendors called out fervently to potential patrons.

Meanwhile, the small courtyard shaded beside the lake, where breezes swept over the water, felt particularly cool.

Today, the Cangya Mountains disciples left bright and early as usual. Perhaps due to the particularly noteworthy matches today, or maybe because the sun rose earlier in the summer, they were observed by many pairs of eyes—both overt and covert—as they traveled down the street.

Yin Biyue frowned. He could block prying eyes with his spiritual sense, but he couldn't stop others from staring at him. Since he'd descended the mountain, he had become acutely aware of what a pain his unconventional hair color was. If possible, he wanted to change it back.

He would soon experience a duel with a significant gap in cultivation levels, but he still had the leisure to think about these things because his mind was clear. He wasn't worried in the slightest.

He was the first one up, and many knew he was fighting today. His match had garnered attention from the tournament audience to Ye City's gambling houses, and even to the other four continents many thousands of

miles away. In fact, the seats of the east viewing deck in the tournament grounds had to be rearranged because two new elders halfway to the Great Ascension state had come—one from Qinglu Sword Sect, and another from Ye City's own. They hadn't shown themselves before. Choosing to appear now made it seem as if they had come specifically to watch the white-haired young man wield his sword.

Of course, Yin Biyue's cultivation level had nothing to do with it. What drew such interest was the towering shadow of the Sword Sage behind him. The longer those in power lived, the more they overthought things. Xihua Peak had never participated in the Flower-Plucking Tournament before. What was the Sword Sage thinking?

The powerful elders sat upon the viewing deck, sipped Junshan Mist tea under the shade of lush foliage, and exchanged mist-opaque pleasantries with each other. They scrutinized the brash young fighters below until at last the time came for the young man they'd awaited to step into the ring.

Yin Biyue and He Lai saluted each other. The last matches at the other rings had just finished; the administrative disciples were busy announcing the results, clearing the premises, and carrying out the wounded. The pair arrived too early, and without anyone to call the start of the duel, they could only stand quietly facing each other.

With so many people watching, He Lai felt he had to say something.

"You're not bad," he said impassively. He had heard the other had attained the Spirit Concentration state only three years after joining Cangya, so it was an honest statement. But he just had to keep talking. "But your luck has run out. This is as far as you go."

The implication was clear: Matching with him in the first round meant the end of Yin Biyue's journey.

The crowd broke into murmurs, yet there were no jeers. He Lai's confidence bordered on arrogance, but he had the skills to back up his talk. In cultivation level alone, he was one state higher than Yin Biyue. The crowd wondered how the Sword Sage's disciple would respond.

Luo Mingchuan's face grew worried. His shidi was so innocent; how would he deal with such a situation? Duan Chongxuan looked upset as well. He wished he were the one standing in the ring so he could tear into He Lai.

Yin Biyue didn't speak. He turned around and walked toward the large elm tree beside the ring and broke off a branch under the watchful eyes of everyone. With a firm flick of his wrist, the green leaves fell. Then he returned to position holding the stick.

He Lai's face darkened when he understood Yin Biyue's intentions, but he settled himself. "If you don't draw your sword now, you won't have the chance to ever again."

The crowd erupted again.

"What's he thinking? Using a branch as a sword for a cross-level fight?!"

"The Sword Sage's disciple… Are they all this arrogant?!"

Yin Biyue still didn't speak.

From the corner of his eye, he had noticed the powerful viewers seated in the viewing deck and sensed the two sets of eyes on him. If it weren't for the keen perception of his own powerful soul, he wouldn't have been able to detect the spiritual senses of those in the Great Ascension state.

He couldn’t inject his vital qi into the sword. Maybe those in the Small Ascension state wouldn’t notice the way he was wielding his sword, but he couldn’t risk it in front of Great Ascensioners. He had no choice. Fighting with a branch was his only option. All the strategies he’d devised for this duel in the past few days were forfeit.

His calm logic looked like arrogance in the eyes of others; to He Lai, it was a pure insult. His expression chilled.

Just then, the administrative disciple hurried to their ring and announced, “Yin Biyue of the Cangya Mountains versus He Lai of Baopu Sect.”

As they had already saluted each other, the fight began almost immediately.

He Lai drew his sword.

In the same breath, a blinding sword glare flashed from afar and split into eight beams. It sliced through the air with a piercing, shrill whistle that echoed across the grounds. A swirling Eight Trigrams rune enveloped the entire ring with its green glow.

Yin Biyue was surrounded with all eight directions of retreat sealed off. No matter which way he struck, the other seven swords would converge on him in an instant. The sword embodied the Eight Trigrams, within which dwelt qiankun—*the world*.

He Lai was as serene as still water. He had waited for this moment for so long, and had practiced this move so thoroughly, that the time between drawing the sword and the execution of the technique was almost nonexistent.

He opened with his strongest move. The angle of the strike and the control of vital qi was precise to a T. This showed that despite his anger, he remained composed. It also demonstrated that he intended to leave Yin Biyue with no escape whatsoever.

The crowd clearly hadn't expected the pace of the duel to be this fast. To be met so suddenly with such a breathtaking attack, they were left speechless. How would the Sword Sage's disciple counter this well-prepared strike?

Yin Biyue didn't strike. Holding the stick, his figure blurred and vanished. In a flash, he appeared on the west corner of the ring. Then, though he clearly took two steps northward, his form suddenly retreated. Amid the rapid sword glares, his expression remained unchanged, as if he was taking a leisurely stroll.

The crowd was still recovering from the previous strike, gasping in awe that they had witnessed the true Baopu Eight Trigrams Sword. The Eight Trigrams Sword they saw a few days ago seemed like a knockoff compared to this one. They brushed aside Yin Biyue's peculiar footwork and marveled instead that even the Sword Sage's disciple dared not face this cutting light.

However, someone did not overlook his actions.

The cultivator from Ye City, a man halfway to the Great Ascension state, narrowed his eyes, then smiled, the fine wrinkles around his eyes smoothing out. "Treading Lands," he murmured, sounding nostalgic. "It's been a while…"

"Treading Lands" was the light-movement technique Headmaster-xiansheng used when he walked the Central Continent. The world knew of

Headmaster-xiansheng's unparalleled mastery of spatial magic, but many had forgotten that before he had grasped the secrets of space, Treading Lands was his forte.

Treading Lands itself wasn't some guarded secret, but few learned it due to its requirement for immense computational abilities. Coupled with a tremendous exhaustion of mental strength, each step must account for a thousand steps ahead. Thus, no one bothered to touch the dust-covered tomes detailing the footwork technique in the academy's library. Today, however, Yin Biyue used it to calculate the trajectory of his opponent's sword in the duel.

At the front of Qinglu Sword Sect's area, Song Tang said, "As expected."

It was praise.

If he had been the one to face the strike, he would have countered with his own sword style and cultivation, but he wouldn't have been able to evade as flawlessly. Beside him, Zhong Shan only arched his brows.

The rest of the crowd didn't see what they saw, only that He Lai's sword soared with spirit and forced Yin Biyue to retreat. Naturally, they assumed Song Tang was praising Baopu Sect's Eight Trigrams Sword.

By the time He Lai's sword momentum came to an end, Yin Biyue had taken eight steps. The audience noticed eight shallow gashes clawed across the ring as the stone beneath them crumbled away. The platform had a protection array, containing the attack within the ring, but cuts that deep could sever meridians. Yin Biyue had dodged them all, earning awe from the crowd.

He Lai hadn’t expected his strike could be evaded. Still, as one of the leaders of Baopu’s younger generation and a member of Baopu’s Seven, he had more than one attack in his arsenal. Yin Biyue couldn’t dodge every strike.

Before Yin Biyue could steady himself, He Lai lunged and swung his sword again. It wasn’t as fast as the first strike, and the trajectory of the sword was clear. Neither the flashing sword glare nor the swirling Eight Trigrams rune had been visible.

“What a fine ‘Ascending to Azure Skies’!”

The praise came from one of Baopu’s elders, and his disciples behind him quickly echoed in agreement.

Favorable wind lend me strength; I will ascend to azure skies.[28]

Ascending to Azure Skies was Baopu Sect’s light-movement technique. That He Lai could execute it so perfectly in the heat of battle, seamlessly integrating it with his sword, filled the Baopu Sect onlookers with pride. Even the disciples of Qinglu Sword Sect were in awe.

Suddenly, something even more astonishing happened. He Lai’s sword, reflecting the dazzling summer sun, seemed to catch on fire. The disciples closest to the ring felt a wave of heat wash through the protection barrier and over them. The leaves of the elm beside the ring curled in this heatwave, and smoke rose from some as their edges singed.

Tremendous vital qi burst in the air where the sword passed, setting all ablaze—until finally, the blade stopped, its tip pointing at the white-haired young man holding a leafless branch.

Some elders in the Small Ascension state seated in the viewing deck expressed regret for Yin Biyue.

“Good talent, quick footwork, but the gap in cultivation was indeed a chasm. What a pity!”

Nearly everyone thought the same. When He Lai unleashed his strike, Yin Biyue had already lost. It wasn’t his strike alone; the entire ring was now within his sword’s momentum. What footwork could evade it? None. The only option was to step down from the ring.

Luo Mingchuan’s expression hadn’t changed, but his palms were already slick with cold sweat.

To everyone’s surprise, Yin Biyue didn’t move. He merely raised the stick in his hand. Having confirmed his suspicions, it was time for him to counterattack.

The Baopu Seven weren’t lumped together for numbers’ sake. With one more powerful figure, they formed the Eight Trigrams Sword Array. The main trigram was Qian—*heaven*. The main pillar of the array might be an elder or the sect leader himself. As ‘heaven,’ the stronger the Qian trigram, the more powerful the array.

He Lai was the Li trigram.

In the eight gashes left behind by his sword—symbolizing the Eight Trigrams: Qian, Dui, Li, Zhen, Xun, Kan, Gen, Kun—the Li trigram was the clearest. Li represented fire; therefore He Lai’s strongest attack was the Li Fire.

How did one counter fire? With cold water of course. And Yin Biyue’s most familiar attack was the Coldwater Blade.

He raised his leafless branch and the heatwave cooled. Pure winter coursed through the branch and emanated forth.

The disciples below the ring were shocked to find the heat giving way to a coolness in the air. The Baopu elder scowled, the Cangya disciples were thrilled, and in the Qinglu Sword Sect's corner, Zhong Shan's pupils contracted. All the while, the Ye City Great Ascensioner maintained his smile with a twinkle in his eyes. Many had thought the fight was nearing its end, but it had only just begun.

Yin Biyue lifted his wrist and took his stance. Expression unchanged, He Lai unleashed the force of his sword to the extreme and a cluster of flames burst from the tip of his blade. He could sense the change in Yin Biyue and wouldn't give him a single second to move.

But Yin Biyue didn't need a second. His attack was already in motion—the strongest Coldwater Blade paired with the fastest Treading Lands.

An abrupt chill descended. Rapidly, a thin layer of frost formed upon the surface of the stone platform in the midst of summer. But that wasn't enough. Yin Biyue's sword followed the Kan position in the trigram—Water. The direct opposite of Li.

The crowd only saw the branch aimed right at the flames of He Lai's sword, but just when the two weapons were about to clash, Yin Biyue's branch miraculously bypassed the fiery blade and pierced straight through He Lai's right shoulder!

He Lai hissed. The protective armor of Breakthrough state vital qi was penetrated by a mere branch. He Lai kept his sword level in position, yet the flames on his blade died as the light faded from his eyes.

He slowly bent forward, forcing himself not to contort his face in pain. In the end, he hacked out blood, drops of the hot fluid burning holes into the ice on the ground. He stared at the mingling of blood and frost,

dazed and confused. He still didn't know how he had lost. Just moments ago, his opponent had been scrambling to evade his strikes. How could there be a flaw in his Li Fire trigram? Could Yin Biyue understand the Eight Trigrams Sword better than he did? *Impossible.*

Silence blanketed the crowd. They were stunned. This fight's ups and downs had completely shattered their past understanding. How strong did Yin Biyue's sword intent have to be in order to penetrate a cultivator's vital qi armor in the Breakthrough state? They couldn't fathom it.

The elders upon the viewing deck remained silent out of respect. The pacing of the fight had been in Yin Biyue's grasp from the start, yet he was willing to let himself be suppressed by his opponent's attack until he found the way to defeat it. To have such a skilled swordsman in the younger generation was something worthy of respect.

Yin Biyue pulled out the branch, its tip dripping with blood. He Lai stumbled to his knees.

Coldly, Yin Biyue said to He Lai, "Why bother?"

He discarded the branch and stepped down from the platform.

"He ku lai zai"—*Why bother?* These were the first words Yin Biyue had uttered since stepping into the ring. Simple but succinct, the phrase contained He Lai's full name. It sounded like a direct response to He Lai's comment about "bad luck" at the beginning of the match.

Yin Biyue hadn't said anything before not because he had nothing to say, but because he didn't think it was necessary. He'd come to defeat He Lai, not to chat. Besides, they weren't acquainted. He didn't owe He Lai a response. He didn't owe the crowd a response. He had come to fight. To triumph over He Lai's sword.

That was all.

Chapter 31

WHEN YIN BIYUE STEPPED DOWN from the ring, the administrative disciple forgot to announce the winner, Baopu Sect's disciples forgot to go up the platform to carry their fallen comrade, and Cangya's disciples forgot to cheer.

A summer breeze swept past the elm tree, and the lush branches on the side closest to the ring, having endured both scorching flames and ice, shed their leaves amid the wind. The leaves alighted upon the puddles left behind by melted frost. It was as if autumn rain had fallen, washing away the oppressive heat of midsummer and bringing a chill into the mortal world.

The administrative disciple snapped out of it. "The match is over! Yin Biyue of the Cangya Mountains wins!"

The declaration was like a signal, galvanizing the massive crowd below into a roar. Not just the Cangya disciples—many raised their swords in celebration. Their voices spread far and wide, and the Ye City folks watching in the distance also began to applaud.

The Baopu Sect disciples rushed into the ring, supporting the pale-faced He Lai on either side as they helped him down.

Duan Chongxuan cackled loudly. "Sishixiong, from now on, I'll serve you tea, fetch you water, and carry your sword. I'll be in your care!"

It was obviously a joke, and the Cangya disciples all laughed as they congratulated Yin Biyue on his win. Only Luo Mingchuan was still frowning.

“Are you hurt?” he asked gravely.

Yin Biyue’s victory had been so stunning that the others had forgotten what intense sword intent he’d faced earlier. Now that Luo Mingchuan had reminded them, they grew concerned.

“No.” Yin Biyue shook his head.

Luo Mingchuan studied him carefully before finally relaxing. “Let’s head back to rest.”

The Cangya disciples made way to let Luo Mingchuan accompany Yin Biyue back to Qiushui Lake. Duan Chongxuan wanted to go with them, but looking around, he could see a swath of colorful skirts and umbrellas approaching from the distance. Knowing that his presence would cause his shixiong problems, Duan Chongxuan gave up.

“I’ll see you later in the evening at Qiushui Lake. Rest well, Si-shixiong.”

Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue headed back toward Ye City.

As soon as they were gone, the two prominent figures halfway into the Great Ascension also bade their farewells. The elders in the viewing deck quickly rose to their feet to bow and rearrange their seats. Half the disciples from Baopu Sect had already left, carrying He Lai to seek medical help from the medical cultivators of Jiekong Temple. At some point, while the administrative disciples cleared the puddles from the ring, Zhong Shan and Song Tang had also disappeared. The matches continued, but the audience thinned significantly.

Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan traversed the city. It was Minor Heat in solar terms today, and the scorching sun baked the bluestone road until it

gleamed. The long street was empty without any voices or barking dogs, as if the entire city had sunk into a deep afternoon slumber.

Despite the sweltering summer day, Luo Mingchuan felt wisps of chill emanating from Yin Biyue. Luo Mingchuan had long noticed on the road to Ye City that Yin Biyue's body temperature was lower than average, especially at night. Duan Chongxuan had also joked that walking next to shixiong was particularly cool, more heat-relieving than the Fire-Repellant Pearl.

Yin Biyue had spent years training beside the cold pool atop Xihua Peak, the chill of which had entered his body. It wasn't anything unusual—the cultivation methods of martial and spiritual cultivators alike affected and altered the body. But today, after Yin Biyue had unleashed the Coldwater Blade, the iciness was abnormally intense.

Luo Mingchuan stopped mid-step to scrutinize Yin Biyue's face. "Shidi, do you feel unwell anywhere?"

Yin Biyue was surprised, especially after he'd controlled his breathing and pace. He didn't realize Luo Mingchuan would be so perceptive.

Yin Biyue wasn't injured, per se. But the match had been a cross-level fight, after all. Treading Lands rapidly depleted his mental strength, not to mention the final strike had drained him of his vital qi. Relaxing after the duel's intense concentration had left cold seeping from his bones and meridians. It was the lingering intent of the Coldwater Blade.

In the past, he could have resolved an issue this miniscule by circulating his vital qi for one cycle. Unfortunately, he had no vital qi nor

energy at the moment. With Luo Mingchuan's question bringing attention to his condition, a wave of fatigue crashed over him.

I don't have the energy to walk two steps. Are you gonna carry me back…? Heh. That's too embarrassing.

Yin Biyue pursed his lips. "I'm fine. Let's keep going."

Luo Mingchuan didn't move, however, as a trace of chagrin crossed his face. "Actually, I stood for too long under the scorching sun earlier and might have gotten heatstroke. I'm feeling a little dizzy. Shidi, would you mind supporting me?" He flashed a sheepish smile.

The mental image of him and Luo Mingchuan crawling back together to Qiushui Lake flashed through Yin Biyue's mind.

Luo-shixiong, are you serious? How does a cultivator at the Breakthrough level get heatstroke?!

If anyone else had said it, Yin Biyue wouldn't have believed them for a hot second. But all of Cangya knew Luo Mingchuan was a man of noble character who never lied. Yin Biyue's mind began to wander to possible explanations. Could Luo Mingchuan have practiced some special technique that disallowed him prolonged exposure to the sun?

Yin Biyue glanced around at the sweltering street. There was no one, not even a dog. Thus, with great resignation, he nodded.

"All right."

Fine, I'll do it. We'll support each other and crawl back to Qiushui Lake together. But nobody can ever know!

Yin Biyue approached, reached out, and caught Luo Mingchuan's right arm. The man he was supporting leaned into him, enveloping him in a

strange, warm sensation. Although after having traveled together his body no longer reacted when Luo Mingchuan came within three feet, such closeness was unprecedented. Yin Biyue still felt uneasy.

“Sorry for the trouble, Shidi,” said Luo Mingchuan with a sincere expression.

“It’s…no problem,” Yin Biyue replied reluctantly. After a few steps, the anticipated discomfort failed to materialize. Instead, Yin Biyue quickly discovered…

A guy with heatstroke is so cozy! ~€(≧▽≦)/~

The chill emanating from Yin Biyue seeped from his bones and meridians; it could not be dispelled no matter how hot the sun. Supporting Luo Mingchuan was different somehow. A thin sheen of vital qi seemed to circulate on his skin, warm and dry, that transmitted through the robes. It felt like every inch of his bones were basking in warm sunlight, and the damp cold was thoroughly dissipated.

Is the heatstroke so serious that he’s leaking vital qi? He won’t faint, will he? Yin Biyue wondered. He felt some of his energy return and took on more of Luo Mingchuan’s weight as they trudged step by step back to Qiushui Lake.

The cacophony of chirping cicadas echoed down the long street, and the gentle breeze swayed the shadows of trees. Inside Ye City, in the midst of summer, two young men in white supported each other as they made their way through the long, winding, narrow streets. They passed by the countless buildings of the mansions of major households, their eaves hanging with lanterns swirling in the wind, and came at last to the shimmering lake.

At that moment, they both believed themselves to be the other's support.

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"THE SWORD SAGE'S disciple Yin Biyue defeated He Lai, the fifth of Baopu's Seven, at the Flower-Plucking Tournament."

This news spread to every corner of Ye City, then across the Southern Continent and the rest of the world. Every detail of the duel was being recounted—how the fighters had struck with their swords, the twists and turns of the fight, and how harrowing each shift had been. Inside every teahouse and tavern of the Southern Continent, the storytellers told their tales with such vividness that the patrons could almost feel as if they'd been there.

However, those experienced in battle had questions. Treading Lands against Ascending to Azure Skies, Baopu's Eight Trigrams against Coldwater—these were evenly matched styles, and He Lai's cultivation level was higher. How had Yin Biyue won? Was it only his sword's intent? Could he have really executed such perfect sword intent with a branch, given his limited cultivation state?

Thus, the focus was directed to the position and trajectory of Yin Biyue's attack. One theory began to circulate: the Coldwater Blade's one-strike victory hadn't overpowered the opponent but had unraveled the opponent's technique.

Yin Biyue had unraveled the Eight Trigrams Sword.

The team-leading elder of Baopu Sect flew into a rage when he heard this theory.

“Ridiculous! The Eight Trigrams Sword has thousands of variations! I’ve studied the style for a hundred years, yet even I dare not claim mastery. How could a junior less than twenty years of age unravel the technique?!”

He Lai, lying pale in bed, had been Baopu Sect’s greatest hope for victory in the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Thanks to his bad luck, he matched with Yin Biyue in the first round. Flesh wounds could be treated with precious medicines, but how could the cracks in his faith be mended? He was one of Baopu’s Seven, the Li trigram within the Eight Trigrams Sword Array. Without him, the array was incomplete. This was a problem more serious than He Lai’s injuries. To restore his faith and complete the sword array, Baopu Sect had to take action.

The elder carved a jade slip that transformed into a streak of light and shot toward the Hengduan Mountains in the Western Continent.

“Do they really think our sect has no one else?”

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IN THE FOLLOWING MATCHES of the Flower-Plucking Tournament, more Buddhist cultivators from Jiekong Temple and Xingshan Temple appeared, eliciting awe with their display of the “Buddhist Mudra” and the “Immeasurable Dharma Body.” Chu Huan, hailed as the top spiritual cultivator among the young generation of Lianjian Sect, showcased the style “Rejuvenation of the Withered.” Another disciple from Qinglu Sword

Sect, Zhong Shan's shidi of the same peak, had displayed the dazzling Featherflight sword, Feiyu. Even a disciple from a little-known sect in the Eastern Continent emerged as a dark horse, becoming the second person to win a cross-level fight.

Many young people exhibited astonishing talents and cultivation achievements in the first round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament. However, no match had been as exciting as the one between Yin Biyue and He Lai. Thus, the Sword Sage disciple's next match became highly anticipated.

The first round of the tournament concluded with 160 participants advancing to the second round, splitting into 80 groups. This time, the 80 fighters in the latter half would be drawing the lot. Yin Biyue and his two companions didn't need to draw again; they only had to wait to be selected. Since his match, Yin Biyue had been meditating in his room. The fight with He Lai inspired him, so he opted to shut himself in to organize his thoughts. Through introspection, the gate to the Breakthrough state became increasingly clear.

On the day the drawing results came out, Yin Biyue emerged from his room at last. When he pushed open the door, he noticed the chatterbox was about to go out as well.

"Sishixiong, are you going to the Wall of Sunken Shadow to check on the results?" Duan Chongxuan asked. When Yin Biyue nodded, he smiled. "There's a place where news travels faster. Why go so far?"

Yin Biyue understood what he was implying. Duan Chongxuan was once again inviting him to visit the brothel—or, no, the tavern. Given Ye City's gossiping culture, taverns were indeed the fastest source for news.

He glanced at Luo Mingchuan's tightly shut door. He didn't know if the man was inside or if he was out already. That day, after he had helped Luo Mingchuan back and sent him to his room, he hadn't left until he made sure Luo Mingchuan was all right, so there shouldn't be any issues.

Yin Biyue was surprised that Duan Chongxuan was okay to leave their quarters. Previously, every outing had felt like a parade. As they left Qiushui Lake, passed through the mansions of the affluent in the south district, and strolled down Ye City's main avenue, several maidens shot resentful looks their way.

Duan Chongxuan sighed. "I was cornered at the city gate a few days ago, so I said, 'My heart belongs to another. I am wholly devoted and will marry none but her.' It worked really well."

Understanding dawned on Yin Biyue. *So your route has transformed from a golden bachelor to a lovesick eternal bachelor.*

They arrived at Taihe Pavilion, the same place they had visited before. Though it wasn't nightfall yet, the busiest time of the day, the main hall was still packed. They went up the stairs to the second floor.

Yin Biyue was unaware that his reputation was now no less than Duan Chongxuan's. Many had already noticed him as he ascended the stairs. However, no cultivators tried to probe him with their spiritual sense out of wariness, and none stared brazenly out of respect.

As they climbed, the boisterous tavern turned quiet enough to hear a pin drop. A man in long robes with ink-splashed landscapes on the sleeves appeared before them. Yin Biyue wanted to go up and the other party down. The staircase was wide enough for three people to walk side by side, but the man obviously had no intention of yielding the way.

Yin Biyue looked up. The first thing he noticed wasn’t the man’s face, but his sword—the Fengyu Sword. It was Zhong Shan.

Chapter 32

THE ENTIRE TAVERN—the sounds of storytelling, cheering, chopsticks, and bowls—was silent. The hollering and peddling on the streets drifted in through the fretwork window lattices, though they were muffled as if the noise came from another world. Here, no one spoke or looked at them. They were standing in the middle of a staircase. Both the upper and lower floors were packed with patrons. Yet the cultivators on the stairs were being avoided, giving the illusion that they were alone.

It was in this silence that Zhong Shan sidestepped and took two steps down.

He had been standing above them. If he were to speak, Duan Chongxuan and Yin Biyue would have had to look up to him, but he didn't do that. He descended until he was level with the two, turned to face them properly, and bent at the waist in a proper half bow.

Yin Biyue led Duan Chongxuan and calmly returned the courtesy. The entire tavern breathed a sigh of relief. However, before Duan Chongxuan could relax his brow, Zhong Shan parted his lips to speak.

"I started learning the art of the sword when I was four," he began. His voice was a bit raw, almost like a blade scratching on a rough surface.

Yin Biyue paused. Was this…a self-introduction? He didn't understand Zhong Shan's intentions, but since he spoke so seriously, Yin Biyue felt obliged to listen with equal gravity. He nodded, indicating he was listening.

Zhong Shan continued. “I learned the *Basics of the Art of the Sword* at six. I attained Qi Cultivation at ten and Marrow Purification at fourteen. I earned minor achievements in sword styles. After Spirit Concentration, I’ve not met an equal.”

Sharp breaths were sucked in throughout the tavern. Such talents were enough to make anyone proud. But Yin Biyue could tell that the man speaking to him was merely describing the truth rather than boasting his achievements. This was true confidence. True confidence didn’t need to win another’s validation via boasts—he validated himself.

“Before sixteen, I always believed I would become a disciple of the Sword Sage.”

Crash!

In the quiet tavern, someone dropped their tea bowl out of shock. The ceramic shattered and spilled tea all over the ground.

Yin Biyue still didn’t speak, even though that statement sounded provocative.

“The Sword Sage chose you, not me. But I don’t believe it’s because you are stronger. This makes me jealous. I wish to fight you at the Flower-Plucking Tournament.”

Intense battle intent radiated from Zhong Shan as soon as he’d stated his challenge. However, not a single trace of his Breakthrough aura escaped his firm control.

Yin Biyue met his eyes frankly. He now had some idea what kind of person Zhong Shan was. Unlike those from Baopu Sect who deliberately spread rumors behind people’s backs or plotted underhanded tactics, Zhong Shan was forthright—jealousy was jealousy, resentment was resentment.

There was nothing shameful about his feelings. He spoke of them openly and honestly: *I refuse to accept you, so I want to fight you. If you have the skill, make me submit.*

Yin Biyue's eyes fell on Zhong Shan's sword once more. Perhaps only someone who dared to face their own heart, who could speak their mind without shame in a crowded tavern without a care for slander and ridicule behind his back, could wield such a sword.

Duan Chongxuan obviously didn't think the same. Before Yin Biyue could stop him, he'd opened fire.

"Fight him? How are you not ashamed to suggest that when you're a whole level higher than my shixiong?" Duan Chongxuan demanded. "By your logic, the one least worthy of being the Sword Sage's disciple is me, yet here I am. Why? Can't help it—just my good luck. My dad asked Headmaster-xiansheng to write a recommendation letter to send me to Xihua Peak. I entered through the back door. What am I supposed to do? Slit my own throat and try again next life? Write a blood oath to disown my father?!"

Yin Biyue was stunned. Zhong Shan was also stunned. The entire tavern of patrons held their breaths.

Zhong Shan pondered for a moment. "You've got a point…"

"What point?!"

A boy suddenly sprang out from behind Zhong Shan, trembling with anger. He also wore Qinglu Sword Sect's inked landscape robes and held a sword. He had been following behind Zhong Shan the entire time, including down the stairs. Few noticed him because the presence and brilliance of the three in conversation were too great. Now that he'd spoken, everyone

recognized him—Featherflight Sword Cheng Tianyu, who was Zhong Shan's shidi from the same peak.

Huffing and puffing, the furious boy clapped back. "My shixiong's high cultivation level is a result of his own hard work! It didn't drop out of nowhere from the sky. What's there to be ashamed of?! If your shixiong isn't as strong because he didn't cultivate as long—that's because he was born later and my shixiong was born earlier! Can't help it—that's just his good luck!"

Cheng Tianyu was *very* angry! He couldn't interrupt earlier because his shixiong was talking; he had to stand in the background. But when he heard his shixiong agree that the other side had a point, he was so mad that propriety flew out the window.

Oh god, Yin Biyue thought, his stomach sinking. He didn't want to start beef, but the roasts had come so fast. Before he could react, the two were at each other's throats like angry kittens.

He glanced at Zhong Shan and found Zhong Shan also seemed a little…at a loss.

The bun-faced boy Cheng Tianyu grew angrier the more he argued. "You people from Xihua Peak have seriously crossed the line. First, your sanshixiong, Yan Xing, tarnished my Song-shixiong's innocence. Now you're—"

"Enough!"

Everyone looked to the voice and found Qinglu Sword Sect's Junior Sect Leader Song standing at the entrance. His breathing was slightly uneven, perhaps out of annoyance, or perhaps because he had come in a

hurry. Even more surprising was that the chief disciple of the Cangya Mountains had come as well.

Luo Mingchuan stood there poised with a stern expression. The moment Yin Biyue saw him, he felt a wave of relief.

Thank goodness he's here… Now things won't escalate to a brawl. He really wasn't suited to dealing with these kinds of situations. He would leave it to Luo Mingchuan.

The sharp rebuke startled Cheng Tianyu, and he abruptly realized what embarrassing words he'd blurted in public. He flushed beet red. "Sorry, Song-shixiong…"

"Come down," Song Tang said sternly.

Cheng Tiangyu quietly descended the stairs with Zhong Shan behind him. Luo Mingchuan hadn't said anything, but Yin Biyue led Duan Chongxuan downstairs as well.

Incited by Zhong Shan's battle intent, Duan Chongxuan had spoken without thinking. Since he had calmed down, he felt awkward too. It was safer to stand behind Luo Mingchuan and pretend to be mute.

Song Tang gave Luo Mingchuan a half bow. "My shidi is young. Please forgive him for his offense."

Behind him, Cheng Tianyu hung his head and also pretended to be mute.

Luo Mingchuan sidestepped the bow and returned it. "No need to apologize. It was my sect that has caused the offense."

The two calmly exchanged bows and remained composed as if nothing had happened. It made everyone in the tavern wonder if the clash

on the staircase had only been a figment of their imagination.

After the group exited the tavern, the two sects went their separate ways. Duan Chongxuan followed silently behind Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue. This almost felt like two bratty kids brawling, only to be dragged home by their respective parents.

Yin Biyue was startled by the passing thought.

No one spoke until they reached the magnolia tree in the small lakeside courtyard. Luo Mingchuan turned around and, without mentioning the earlier incident, said to Yin Biyue, “The result of the draw is out. Shidi, you got the empty lot.”

Duan Chongxuan’s attention was immediately diverted. “How? Aren’t there exactly eighty groups?”

“Before the draw, someone withdrew their participation due to severe injuries, so there was an empty lot that advanced directly to the next round,” Luo Mingchuan explained. “Incidentally, no one drew Shidi.”

Yin Biyue was stunned. He had actually advanced directly. What luck.

Duan Chongxuan chuckled. “You’re truly favored by the universe, Sishixiong.”

No, no, no, wait. This is only the second round. If I use up my luck now, what will I do in the future?

Luo Mingchuan added, “Duan-shidi, Xu Guang from Lianjian Sect drew your name. You’re the first match in four days.”

Lianjian Sect had considerably more female cultivators than the other sects; their entire Luoxia Peak consisted of only female disciples, though

male disciples still made up the majority overall.

Duan Chongxuan had obviously heard that name before. He smiled. “A spiritual cultivator from Lianjian Sect. Perfect. I’ve been wanting to accumulate some combat experience against spiritual cultivators.”

Yin Biyue knew this meant he didn’t plan on using external aids like talismans anymore. “You’ve got a few days. Prepare well.”

“Don’t you worry, Sishixiong,” assured Duan Chongxuan. Then he flashed a grin at Luo Mingchuan and went inside. He could tell Luo Mingchuan had something to tell his shixiong.

Now, only two remained in the yard. Luo Mingchuan not only had something to say, he had something to give as well. However, as he gazed at Yin Biyue before him, he suddenly found himself at a loss for words.

“Luo-shixiong, who’s *your* opponent?” Yin Biyue ended up speaking first; he was genuinely curious about Luo Mingchuan’s next match.

“A Buddhist cultivator from Xingshan Temple. Third match tomorrow,” Luo Mingchuan replied.

They fell into another silence, neither knowing what to say.

Yin Biyue noticed Luo Mingchuan’s complexion was a bit off. The tips of his ears were red, and his gaze was wandering from place to place.

He can’t possibly have heatstroke again, Yin Biyue thought. Thanks to the Coldwater Blade, he couldn’t feel the heat, but even he could tell the sun was blazing today.

“Luo-shixiong, you should rest. You have a match tomorrow,” he urged.

“All right,” Luo Mingchuan said reluctantly. He turned around and took a couple of steps before pivoting back around. “Shidi.” He lowered his arms, his expansive sleeves covering the pearl in his grip. He clenched his hand, and it dug into his palm.

Yin Biyue was just about to retire to his room as well. He paused when he heard the call. “Hmm?”

“It’s—nothing. Rest well.”

Luo Mingchuan returned to his room and slumped at his desk. On the table, he set a lustrous pearl that glistened with a dark-red sheen.

“Shidi, this is a Fire-Element Pearl. Carry it with you and you’ll never suffer from the chill in your body again.”

Such a simple sentence. After rehearsing it so many times in his head, why couldn’t he just say it?

Since the day they had helped each other back to Qiushui Lake, he’d been searching for information on the Fire-Element Pearl. These pearls, produced in the volcanic region of the Eastern Continent, could dispel cold. Cultivators living near snowy plains often wore them. Because the climate in Ye City was temperate without any harsh winters, Fire-Element Pearls were a rarity here. Fortunately, he had run into Song Tang today. Thanks to Song Tang’s familiarity with the city, Luo Mingchuan had been able to acquire a pearl from the black market.

On the way back, he had noticed a crowd gathering outside Taihe Pavilion who were whispering to each other but too scared to step inside. With his senses, he heard the commotion and rushed over with Song Tang, relieved to find both sides unharmed.

As a bystander, he had been able to see the situation clearly. He could tell Zhong Shan bristled with battle intent but bore no ill will. It had been Duan Chongxuan and Cheng Tianyu who'd nearly thrown hands.

Luo Mingchuan had already made up his mind on what to do about Zhong Shan, though he couldn't share the solution with his shidi just yet. No matter how difficult these matters, a solution always existed. But…

He glanced at the pearl on his desk. Why had he changed his mind about giving it to his shidi? Was it because as long as he was by his shidi's side, *he* could chase away the cold for him?

Was there some other reason?

Luo Mingchuan didn't dare dwell further on the subject. He felt that if he did, he might come to a conclusion he couldn't handle. He stood up and went to meditate, reciting the Purification Mantra in his head before he began his training.

In the other room across the courtyard, Yin Biyue was also meditating. When he had faced Zhong Shan's tremendous battle intent earlier, he had sensed his internal cultivation barrier loosening. He knew as he was now, he couldn't defeat Zhong Shan. He needed to achieve Breakthrough.

Chapter 33

JUST AS BILLOWING WAVES washed away rough grains of sand, the number of disciples participating in the second round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament had halved. Some were recuperating behind closed doors, some were organizing the insights they'd gained in their first match, and some of the smaller sects had already left Ye City, as no one in their sects had made it to the second round.

Although the competing disciples decreased, the overall population in Ye City didn't diminish in the slightest. Many were here to see the next round.

The powerful came to see how far the younger generation of cultivators had progressed, and whether the "Age of Stars" prophesied by Headmaster-xiansheng had truly arrived. And for the sake of encouraging their own juniors, disciples who'd participated in previous Flower-Plucking Tournaments came to share their combat experience with those of the same sect.

On this particular day, the sun blazed fiercely overhead, choking the air with oppressive heat. A fresh team of cyan-robed cultivators arrived in Ye City. They hadn't come to watch the tournament, nor had they come to encourage their peers. They were here to meet someone.

"That Yin Biyue drew an empty lot this round?"

The man asking was polishing his sword at a table. The sword was long and jet-black. It did not reflect light, as though it absorbed the blinding rays beaming through the window. The man was the same. He sat by the

window but sunlight seemed to retreat from him. Though he asked a question, his expression was indifferent, and he didn't spare a glance at the person beside him.

"Yes, Shixiong," replied He Lai. He had mostly recovered from his injuries and could now walk. He stood respectfully by the table.

The man who asked the question didn't speak again, and his eyes never strayed from his sword. A long time passed—to the point that sweat rolled down He Lai's back. He was unable to withstand the invisible pressure emanating from the man.

Finally, he spoke. "The matter ends here. Focus on your sword training from now on. Don't embarrass yourself again."

He Lai was overjoyed. He knew that when the man said the matter would end, it didn't mean the matter was *dropped*. He had agreed to resolve it instead.

Lifting the hem of his robes, He Lai knelt and bowed. "Yes, thank you, Shixiong! Thank you!"

The man waved dismissively. "You may leave."

After He Lai bowed and left, the team-leading elder of Baopu Sect entered the room and stopped at a polite distance. "Have you decided to take action, sir?"

Based on seniority, such formality was absurd. But at Baopu Sect, no one thought it strange.

The man's lips curved downward. He understood what the question implied—to be wary of angering the Sword Sage with violence. "I will not kill him."

The Baopu Sect elder sighed a breath in relief, the wrinkles on his face smoothing out as he silently retreated from the room.

The man continued to polish his sword. Saying he wouldn't kill was true. On the other hand, severely injuring, maiming, or ripping out meridians didn't count.

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THE SECOND ROUND of the Flower-Plucking Tournament began, and two topics dominated the talk of the city. The first was the confrontation between the Tempest Sword and the disciple of the Sword Sage, where the former publicly challenged the latter to a duel. Although both parties had been taken away by their respective shixiong, leaving the incident without a resolution, everyone believed Zhong Shan and Yin Biyue would eventually face each other. It was a pity that Yin Biyue drew an empty lot this round. How regrettable.

In contrast, the second news sent chills down people's spines. Apparently, someone had seen the second fighter of Baopu's Seven—Zheng Wei—at Xinshui Bridge in the city's north district.

The authenticity of this rumor was highly doubtful. What did he want, coming here? To kill? This was Ye City. Was he really going to test the might of the city master?

Regardless of who had or hadn't come, the Flower-Plucking Tournament had so far proceeded smoothly. The matches in the second round were even more thrilling and intense. For easier viewing, what used

to be four rings were now only two, significantly slowing the pace of the competition. Without time restrictions and the possibility of draws, fighters who matched in strength sometimes dueled from dawn to dusk before a winner was declared.

Among these intense fights, the match between Luo Mingchuan and Puhong of Xingshan Temple stood out as particularly unique. According to those who'd watched the fight, the chief disciple of Cangya hadn't used his sword nor lashed with the disciplinary whip technique. Instead, he used palm techniques and footwork to defeat the long-renowned "Compassion Mudra" of Xingshan Temple. Halfway through the match, both sides stopped to debate the philosophies of Buddhism, leaving the spectators baffled and utterly lost by the sudden conversation.

The disciple of the Cangya Mountains debating Buddhism with a Buddhist cultivator of Xingshan Temple sounded absurd. Yet come sunset, Puhong shocked the onlookers by admitting defeat with a broad smile and stepping down from the ring.

Unfortunately, Yin Biyue had missed this exciting debate. He was in a critical stage of introspection, having reached a certain mysterious state in his meditation.

Eyes closed and spirit focused, he observed the external world. He could see the patterns on the nephrite table, the falling petals of the magnolia tree in the yard, the shimmering waters of Qiushui Lake, and the bustling streets of Ye City with its countless buildings. He turned his focus inward. He could see the beating of his heart, the flow of his vital qi, and the circulation of his blood.

He wasn’t seeing all this with his eyes. What the eyes could see might not always be real. He used his soul to see, which unveiled everything.

He felt the vital qi rushing in his meridians like a great river carving through rocks and mountains, carrying with it a bone-deep chill. For the first time in his life, this cold did not bring him pain. Instead, it left him feeling refreshed.

He guided the vital qi toward his core, like innumerable rivers flowing to the sea. In that moment, he felt as if his physical body had merged with the universe.

Was the vast sea truly the destination?

This was the fourth day of Yin Biyue’s closed-door meditation. The temperature in the courtyard had dropped and a thin layer of frost had formed on the stone floors. The magnolia tree wilted, unable to withstand the cold, and its fallen blooms scattered across the grounds. When the brisk wind blew, the white petals looked like waves of snow lapping the shore.

Standing calmly under the tree, Luo Mingchuan was impressed. “Introspective meditation. Shidi is about to break through his level.”

“Unfortunately, I have a match to go to,” Duan Chongxuan said solemnly. “I’ll leave Sishixiong in your care.”

Luo Mingchuan nodded, his eyes resolute. In his sleeves, his clenched fists were clammy with cold sweat. He knew his shidi had reached a critical moment in his cultivation that allowed not a single mishap.

Most of the Cangya disciples had already gone to the tournament grounds; the courtyards were empty, with no one training by the lake. After Duan Chongxuan left, the only person in the courtyard closest to the lake

was Luo Mingchuan. His sleeves fluttered in the wind alongside autumn frost and fallen petals. Here, the summer heat transformed into desolate autumn chill.

Coldness intensified in the air along with wisps of sword qi mixed in the brisk wind—it was the sword intent of the Coldwater Blade starting to overflow. Luo Mingchuan's stomach dropped. His shidi was using his sword? Could he have encountered a bottleneck?

Yin Biyue frowned. The core was the sea but not the destination. What a breakthrough *broke* was the barrier of the heart, in which he must see his true self.

He let his consciousness drift in the sea inside him; it was his first time seeing it. He knew that every cultivator possessed their own 'sea' after attaining the Spirit Concentration state. All of his vital qi was conceived and stored here, the starting point from which it flowed into every meridian, circulating through a full cycle, before returning to the sea. For as long as one lived, this sea would not dry up. Yet only during breakthrough could this sea be 'seen.'

At this moment, his sea was shrouded in thick, white mist that obscured the light. He wanted to see clearly, yet was powerless to do so, as if he wasn't the master of this sea. He had never experienced the pain and hardship of breakthrough when attaining the Qi Cultivation, Marrow Purification, and Spirit Concentration levels. He didn't know why the Sword Sage would take him in as a disciple, why Xiansheng wanted to kill Luo Mingchuan, or, in fact…why he had originally wanted to be a villain.

Awash in endless confusion, mired in unanswered questions, the barrier in his heart remained unbroken, and so the mist persisted.

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OUTSIDE THE SMALL COURTYARD, the weather was stiflingly hot. The entire Ye City was like a giant steamer basket, making it hard to breathe. Without warning, the sky darkened, and gusts began to blow from every direction. The gales tore through the streets, sweeping up the banners and lanterns of restaurants, the thin clothes hanging to dry in people's yards, and the reeds of Qiushui Lake in the city's south.

Someone opened a window and called a warning to their neighbors. "Rain's coming! Go home! Close your windows and take in your laundry!"

As soon as the words were shouted, thunder clapped in the distant sky. The lively streets emptied. Summer rain in the Southern Continent came as swift as a flying dragon. Thunder rumbled and large raindrops pounded the earth with such power that they kicked up dirt. The rain quickly formed a curtain, enveloping the entire city in its deluge. Under the force of wind and lightning, the shrill cries of the downpour washed the world.

Through the curtain of rain, two fighters saluted each other in the ring. The spectating disciples below the platform had circulated a thin layer of vital qi on their bodies, shielding themselves from the wet. As for the viewing deck on the east side, not even the floors were wet.

Duan Chongxuan cupped his hands. "Please enlighten me."

"I hear the flame talisman is fabricated with heavenly fire and is impervious to rain. Is that true?" his opponent, Xu Guang, asked.

Duan Chongxuan was taken aback by the question. Thinking Xu Guang was merely curious, he replied earnestly, “Yes.”

Xu Guang turned his head to the administrative disciple. “I yield!”

Duan Chongxuan was dumbfounded. He…hadn’t planned on using talismans at all!

“It was already a fluke for me to have passed the first round,” Xu Guang muttered to his fellow Lianjian disciple after descending from the ring. “Against a guy with who knows how many talismans, it’s better to let the Qinglu Sword Sect—who see honor as life itself—deal with him.”

The disciple looked sympathetic. “Honestly, even if you defeated him, our shijie would never forgive you.”

Xu Guang glanced at the crowd of his shijie and shimei watching the ring eagerly, considered this seriously for a moment, then decided his fellow disciple made an excellent point.

Duan Chongxuan cupped his hands again in a quick salute below the ring before he turned and rushed in the direction of Qiushui Lake.

Heavy rain fell on Qiushui Lake, stirring thousands of ripples across its surface. Schools of green and red carp floated to the top from the disturbance. A rainy mist shrouded the gray-tiled roofs of the lakeside courtyard complex, as if veiling it with smoke. Raindrops rolled down the eaves forming strings of beads that beat against the stone steps in front of the doors. Once the precipitation entered this particular small courtyard, it transformed into baleful autumn rain.

Autumn wind, autumn rain, a melancholy refrain.[29]

But the autumn rain wasn’t the problem. Rather, it was the killing intent seeping through the veil of rain.

Luo Mingchuan’s hand was already on the hilt of his sword. He rarely gripped his blade, yet he moved with natural ease. His gaze was fixed on the rooftop across, where a man stood in cyan robes. The man held a longsword and bore an expression of frigid indifference. The storm steered clear of him, unable to come close to his person.

No one saw him arrive; he’d appeared like a ghost. The tearing of array flags Yin Biyue had planted around the yard before mixed with the thrashing of the storm and created a shrill, piercing noise. A feeling of annihilation descended upon this small courtyard, enveloping it.

Killing intent this tangible would not be possible without having killed thousands to hone it. Luo Mingchuan saw the man’s robes and sword, and recognized him: Zheng Wei.

He dropped the hand on the sword. No matter how fast he drew it, it wouldn’t be faster than Zheng Wei stabbing the one inside the building—his shidi in the midst of a breakthrough.

The year Zheng Wei had made his name, the Baopu Seven hadn’t been established yet. Two of the seven hadn’t even been born at the time. Unlike others who gained fame through their cultivation or duels, Zheng Wei earned his infamy through murder. This caused many to believe Zheng Wei’s interest lay not in cultivation or the art of the sword but in killing.

Zheng Wei stared far into the distance, as though he was gazing at the lake or at the rain. In his eyes, other people—whether Luo Mingchuan in the Breakthrough state, Yin Biyue in the middle of his breakthrough inside the building, or Duan Chongxuan outside the courtyard, struggling to move

—were mere ants whom he could kill at any time. They didn’t deserve his attention. Why not enjoy the view instead?

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BEFORE DUAN CHONGXUAN had reached Qiushui Lake, he’d sensed devastating killing intent. It spurred him into a mad dash as he rushed through the heavy rain and splashed through puddles. He was blocked outside the courtyard walls. An invisible force had sealed off the whole place, rendering him unable to move another inch, as though a mighty mountain was crushing him from above.

Without hesitation, he whipped open an oil-paper umbrella.

The umbrella wasn’t for sheltering him from the rain. The mountain turned into an avalanche of massive boulders while Duan Chongxuan stumbled forward under the umbrella. He guessed who was standing on the roof. Even someone in the Small Ascension state would want to stay away from such a man, let alone someone like him, who was only at the Spirit Concentration level. But he couldn’t retreat. His shixiong was still in there!

Duan Chongxuan wanted to grab his sword, yet when he felt inside his sleeves, it wasn’t there. For the first time in his life, he regretted slacking in his cultivation. Not that it mattered. Before Zheng Wei, no type of blade would work.

He held the umbrella in one hand and raised an arrow in the other. He knew with his cultivation level, the arrow could penetrate the barrier of the courtyard but not reach anywhere near the man. In that moment, he finally

agreed with something his father once said: *“A divine weapon is all well and good, but you must be alive to use it.”*

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THE RAIN FELL EVER HARDER as thunder rumbled across the land. Inside his room, Yin Biyue had reached a state of selflessness. He couldn’t sense the storm, but he could sense the killing intent beneath it. It was like an iron needle piercing through the roof to aim unerringly at his back.

With the threat behind him, he had no way to escape. He wasn’t alone. The one under the magnolia tree, the one beyond the courtyard wall—they were all trapped in this storm with no way out.

The man on top of the roof recognized the umbrella and arrow in Duan Chongxuan’s hands. He raised his eyebrows, though his expression remained otherwise unruffled. He didn’t think using that arrow was a form of bravery. On the contrary, he considered it foolish. Ants persisting in their endeavor despite knowing the futility of their actions would still die in vain.

Luo Mingchuan no longer reached for his sword. He only stared at Zheng Wei. The color of his eyes slowly descended from gentle amber to abyssal black; it was at once both peculiar and natural. If Yin Biyue were around, he would have recognized the Ghara Pupil Technique. Eyes moved faster than the sword, after all.

In his meditation, Yin Biyue knew the best course of action to face the threat was to abandon his breakthrough. But he didn’t want to.

He didn’t want to unravel the obvious and hidden mysteries of the world around him; he didn’t want to know the answers to those questions. In fact, he didn’t want to care about the sharp killing intent pressed against his back. All he wanted was to live well in this life. He wanted *power*.

He drew his sword and slashed.

How could he break through the barrier if the mist persisted? If he couldn’t see through it—he’d cut through it!

Yin Biyue’s physical body was still seated on the cushion with his eyes closed, yet upon his inner sea, Yihu was unsheathed. A massive energy burst forth from his room as the sword intent from the Coldwater Blade rushed out. At this critical juncture, breakthrough was only a step away. If the man on the roof wanted to attack, now was the best time.

The centers of Luo Mingchuan’s eyes had turned completely black, Duan Chongxuan had filled his arrow to the brim with his vital qi, and in that instant, the storm seemed to pause.

Zheng Wei shot a glance at the city with a slight frown. Then he vanished into the rain. His icy killing intent also receded until it was gone without a trace. The roof tiles where he had once stood were soon wet from the rain. The entire courtyard appeared as if nothing had visited save for the storm.

The tension broken, Luo Mingchuan relaxed and stumbled a step or two before he steadied himself. To many, facing the overwhelming might of a Small Ascensioner without backing down was an incredible feat. Outside the courtyard wall, Duan Chongxuan heaved a long sigh. Then, at his limit, he slumped against the wall and sat in a muddy puddle, his hair sticking to his face from sweat and rain, his umbrella thrown to the side.

Zheng Wei's arrival seemed inexplicable, and his departure was just as hard to explain. With their cultivation levels, they couldn't comprehend the clashes of those in the Small Ascension state and above. Luo Mingchuan only dared to relax because he noticed Zheng Wei had glanced in the direction of the city master's mansion before he left.

Yin Biyue had struck the inner sea. His indomitable blade had slashed through the mist, dispelling it to reveal a calm sea of deep blue and a clear path to heaven. In that moment, light shone down and filled the infinite space. His body felt light and free. A wind picked up, converging the world's spiritual energy to form spiritual qi that flowed into the great sea. That boundless sea, surging with joy, had expanded more than twice its size. He calmly guided the vital qi it provided through every inch of his meridians until it flowed in peace.

Summer rainstorms were fleeting; it took less than half a cup of tea's time for the rain to start and end. Once the dark clouds parted, rays of the late afternoon sun brightened the western sky. Damp mist and chimney smoke intermingled with the radiance to stream across the land.

Ye City slowly came back to life. The calls of street vendors rose once more, children splashed across the bluestone tiles, and people brought out stools to sit by the streets, enjoying the long-awaited cooldown. At the foot of Mount Chongming, the day's tournament matches concluded and disciples from various sects trickled back into the city. They marveled at the timely rain that washed away the oppressive heat of the past half month.

Beside Qiushui Lake, Yin Biyue emerged from his room. Luo Mingchuan was standing under the magnolia tree with shallow puddles at his feet and the hems of his robes spotted with frost. Yet his smile was as warm as the vernal breeze.

Duan Chongxuan, who was sitting under the tree and panting, also broke into a smile at the sight of Yin Biyue.

“Congratulations, Sishixiong, on attaining the next level!”

Chapter 34

AFTER THE CONGRATULATIONS, the bad news had to be shared. Without wasting words, the three began to discuss the concerning danger.

“Zheng Wei came, but then left,” Duan Chongxuan said after considering his words carefully. “I’m guessing it’s the city master who intervened.”

“That’s right,” Luo Mingchuan confirmed. “It was Lord Ye.”

Yin Biyue frowned. “Did Zheng Wei come because I defeated He Lai?”

That made no sense. It was decided that the participants of the Flower-Plucking Tournament accepted the outcomes of their matches. Fellow peers of the same sect with higher cultivation levels could come to watch the competition as a gesture of encouragement, but there had never been a precedent of revenge post-match.

“One of Baopu’s five elders that our shifu killed on the banks of Ba River was Zheng Wei’s master,” Duan Chongxuan pointed out.

Yin Biyue knew that, but it still made no sense. Baopu Sect had endured it for so many years; why act up now?

Duan Chongxuan’s next words brought heaviness to the room.

“News from the Eastern Continent says half a month ago, someone saw our shifu enter the Yunxing Abyss. I only learned about it three days ago. You were deep in your breakthrough, Shixiong, which is why I didn’t tell you. I’ve already sent word back to Xihua Peak.”

Yunxing Abyss was a place no light could penetrate. During the time of the Heavenly Tribulation, the sky was veiled with molten fire and the earth fractured with countless abysses. A thousand years after it was over, most chasms closed, save for one that continued to grow until it stretched across half of the Eastern Continent. No one knew how deep it went because none that entered ever returned. Hence, it was named Yunxing—*the abyss of falling stars.*

"Very few people know about this," Duan Chongxuan said. "I didn't think Baopu Sect would get the news so fast and react even faster. I'm guessing they don't think our shifu is coming back."

Yin Biyue's heart grew heavy. He had no clue why the Sword Sage had gone to Yunxing Abyss or what his years of wandering outside Cangya were about. Nevertheless, Yin Biyue was sure that whatever the Sword Sage was doing, he had a reason. In fact, his shifu might be doing something monumental.

If the Sword Sage left this world, then the Second Sage of Baopu Sect would become the strongest in the world. The Cangya Mountains had no Second Sages. The sect leader might be in the Great Ascension level, but his combat abilities were nowhere near Jun Yu, who was halfway to the Great Ascension level. This was a huge problem. If the worst-case scenario were to happen, the danger wouldn't just affect them—it would threaten the entire Cangya Sect.

The three of them understood that Zheng Wei's appearance was merely a test: If the Sword Sage never appeared, it might be because he *couldn't.* News of this would travel quickly, and enemies of the Sword Sage and the Cangya Mountains, whether they be in the light or shadows, would know. Endless crises were sure to follow.

Yin Biyue knew the first to face these dangers would be himself.

Of the five disciples of Xihua Peak, discounting the chatterbox, Yin Biyue was the one with the lowest cultivation level. And many had heard that Duan Chongxuan had joined Xihua Peak on account of Headmaster-xiansheng's recommendation letter, and therefore it was understood that they might be kin. Even if the Sword Sage was no longer around, the academy was eternal—including the Xiansheng presiding over it.

However, Baopu Sect's Second Sage wouldn't attack directly. Above the level of Second Sage was Sagehood, a level restricted by the universe. They had to consider karma when they acted. Only the Sword Sage ever moved without restraint, which was why his reputation of disrespecting the Heaven's Will spread in secret. Someone like him, however many people worshipped him, would have just as many who wished for his death.

The first question was now answered; Yin Biyue had two more. "Why was it Zheng Wei?"

If the result of the test had been the appearance of the Sword Sage, the first to die would be Zheng Wei. Was he truly so devoted to his sect that he was willing to sacrifice his life?

As the chief disciple of the Cangya Mountains, Luo Mingchuan was aware of more about the situation in each sect.

"In terms of cultivation level and combat power, the leader of Baopu's Seven, Lin Yuangui, is of course the highest. But Zheng Wei was the best candidate for the mission," he explained. "Zheng Wei attained Spirit Concentration at the age of fourteen. After he challenged Lin Yuangui and lost, he went outside of the sect and killed three hundred brigands out of frustration."

Duan Chongxuan snorted. “As if there’d be so many brigands around the Hengduan Mountains. That’s what Baopu Sect tells people. In my opinion, those were all ordinary folks.”

Yin Biyue felt chills. Spirit Concentration at fourteen and already killing.

“He progressed through the cultivation levels very quickly,” Luo Mingchuan continued, “though he was less a genius and more a monster. Every time he hit a bottleneck in his cultivation, he would kill. After killing so many, he lost reverence for life—including his own. Avenging He Lai accounts for one of the reasons he came here, but he came mostly for himself.”

Luo Mingchuan then considered the situation from a different angle. “Zheng Wei is a sharp weapon that Baopu Sect can’t fully control. Compared to Lin Yuangui, who has a strong sense of responsibility to the sect, he is better suited for sacrifice.”

Duan Chongxuan hadn’t thought of it that way, but it made sense. “Here I thought it was because Lin Yuangui can’t leave the mountain so easily, since a part of Baopu’s great mountain-protection array should be in his hands.”

Yin Biyue had the same thought. A part of Cangya’s great mountain-protection array was also in their elder shixiong’s hands, after all.

Yin Biyue had thought he disliked people like the petty He Lai the most, but that had been a mistake. Compared to Zheng Wei, He Lai was almost normal.

Now came the last question. “Why did Lord Ye help us?”

Could he be a friend of the Sword Sage? It was lonely at the top; even Headmaster-xiansheng, who was believed to be the Sword Sage's close friend, might not align with him.

Did the Sword Sage…actually have friends?

Duan Chongxuan pulled out a small booklet from his sleeve and flipped through it with familiarity until he stopped at a page.

"Chapter Three, Article Twelve: To avoid disturbing the people and causing collateral damage, cultivators are forbidden from engaging in martial combat within the city. Cultivators in the Small Ascension level and above are also forbidden from releasing killing intent. Those who desire to settle superiority or fight to the death, please move your duel to the combat arena located in the west district or outside the city walls. Violators will be punished according to Chapter Six."

"What's that?" Yin Biyue asked.

Duan Chongxuan flipped back to the cover. "'Ye City Laws.' They hand it out for free at the city gates every day to visiting cultivators. Unfortunately, not many people take it."

Yin Biyue blinked, speechless.

Luo Mingchuan was also a little surprised. "Regardless, Lord Ye helped us this time."

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ZHENG WEI had the same question as Yin Biyue.

He couldn’t understand why Lord Ye would intervene. The city administration maintained a good relationship with Qinglu Sword Sect, but he’d never heard it had any ties with the Cangya Mountains. He came all this way to Ye City—not necessarily to kill Yin Biyue, but he was at least prepared to severely injure him. He refused to accept an alternative outcome.

His resentment was so palpable that every Baopu Sect disciple could feel it. As he stomped through the winding corridor, the verdant greenery began to wilt, as if the place had fast-forwarded to autumn. In his wake, the courtyard complex beside Xinshui Bridge descended into a deathly stillness.

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EVERYONE FAMILIAR WITH Ye Zhiqiu, the city master, knew he was an overbearing man.

If what had happened at Qiushui Lake during the storm had occurred outside the city, he wouldn’t even blink. But he did not allow anyone to kill *inside* his city, nor did he permit the release of tangible killing intent. This was the city’s law. That brat from Baopu Sect obviously hadn’t read it.

Indeed, Small Ascensioner Zheng Wei earned his infamy from killing at a young age. But in Ye Zhiqiu’s eyes, he was nothing more than a greenhorn.

Ye Zhiqiu knew everything that went on in his city.

To many prominent figures, colliding with vendors or releasing killing intent were insignificant matters. He didn't see it that way. The vendors and peddlers were equally his people. Killing intent, to him, was a direct challenge to his authority.

City Master Ye, who'd been sipping tea in the shade, knit his brows. This was the second time Baopu Sect had failed to follow the city's laws.

Tsk. Three strikes and you're out. They better not test his patience. He waved the steward over.

"Send some copies of the City Laws Handbook to the bunch staying by Xinshui Bridge."

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EVER SINCE Zheng Wei's visit, the small lakeside courtyard had become unusually quiet. Yin Biyue noticed that Duan Chongxuan seemed to have stopped slacking off overnight. Not only did he talk less, he even stopped going to taverns and gambling houses. More often, he could be found cultivating inside his room or asking Luo Mingchuan for advice.

Indeed, as the chief disciple of Cangya, Luo Mingchuan was adept at answering questions. Although Yin Biyue was equally well-read and free of cultivation obstacles, he didn't know how to teach.

Duan Chongxuan wasn't surprised by this. Instead, he thought it made perfect sense. "Dashixiong doesn't know how to teach, either," he said. "When I first entered the peak, it was Shijie who taught me how to

cleanse my meridians and temper my bones. Cultivation is practically instinctive to geniuses like you. How would you know how to teach?”

Yin Biyue didn’t consider himself a genius. In fact, with his shixiong and shijie setting such high standards, he felt an invisible pressure impelling him to work harder. At night, when he practiced the sword by the lake, the ferocious force of his sword now carried a hint of desperation. They shared an unspoken understanding that they couldn’t stay in Ye City, where martial combat was forbidden, forever. If the world was to change, their shixiong and shijie at Xihua Peak had more important matters to attend to.

Mired in such tension, every time Yin Biyue saw the calm and collected Luo Mingchuan, it soothed his restlessness. Luo Mingchuan’s cultivation had a solid foundation that progressed at a steady pace. He was neither impatient for fame nor obsessed with obtaining strength. It was the ideal state—the least likely to lead one astray.

At least, that was what Yin Biyue thought until Duan Chongxuan took him aside. “Sishixiong, I think there’s something very off about Luo-shixiong lately.”

Yin Biyue was surprised. “How so?”

Duan Chongxuan frowned. “I can’t put my finger on it. If I had to say… It’s his eyes. When I was little, I watched a whole lot of people around my house. Words and actions can be false, but the eyes never lie. I think Luo-shixiong has run into some issues with his mental state, maybe?”

With Duan Chongxuan’s warning, Yin Biyue paid closer attention, but he couldn’t see Luo Mingchuan behaving any differently than usual. Nonetheless, mental issues were serious matters. Unable to relax

completely, Yin Biyue decided to sit down with Luo Mingchuan for a heart-to-heart after the conclusion of the third round of the tournament.

Time flew by when they focused on cultivation. Before they realized it, the third round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament was upon them. Most of the Cangya disciples were completely unaware of the crisis that had taken place in that storm, as well as the news about the Sword Sage. Some were depressed after being eliminated in the previous round, while others eagerly discussed the next round's draw. Unburdened, they continued to practice their swords by the lake, playfully fighting each other. When they strolled the streets of Ye City and saw the girls from Lianjian Sect, they couldn't help but take a second look. They sprawled on rooftops to gaze at the stars, sleepily talking about how they, too, would become prominent figures like the Sword Sage in the future…

In the previous round, Ruan Xiaolian had narrowly lost to a disciple of Lianjian Sect. He Yanyun bought her some cold rice cakes to cheer her up.

"Don't worry. Once I get into the top ten, I'll give you the leaf I pluck."

Ruan Xiaolian's eyes lit up at once. "Then let's make glutinous rice chicken wrapped in lotus leaf after you've plucked it!"

In order to encourage the young people of the cultivation world, the top ten of the Flower-Plucking Tournament could also scale Mount Chongming to pluck a lotus leaf as a symbol of honor. He Yanyun wasn't actually confident that she could enter the top ten. Still, she patted her chest proudly. "But of course!"

Ruan Xiaolian giggled, finding nothing wrong whatsoever about using the lotus leaf that symbolized honor from the Flower-Plucking Tournament to make snacks.

Luo Mingchuan was matched against a disciple from a small sect in the borderlands of the Western Continent whose cultivation level wasn't comparable to his. It looked like a sure win.

Yin Biyue had drawn Chen Yi of Lianjian Sect, who was similar to him in cultivation level. However, Chen Yi was a disciple under the Second Sage of Lianjian Sect, so his combat ability was probably higher than his level. Yin Biyue frowned, but his confidence didn't falter.

After Duan Chongxuan drew his lot, his face fell.

"Cheng Tianyu of Qinglu Sword Sect," he announced.

The image of that huffing bun-faced boy surfaced anew in Yin Biyue's mind.

Chapter 35

CHENG TIANYU WAS the youngest disciple under the Second Sage of Qinglu Sword Sect. At the Flower-Plucking Tournament this year, due to Zhong Shan's overwhelming fame, not many had noticed Cheng Tianyu. Every time he appeared, he'd been well-mannered and rule-abiding, standing willingly behind Song Tang and Zhong Shan.

That didn't mean he would be easy to defeat. Duan Chongxuan didn't feel relieved by his opponent's young age either. On the contrary, he had watched Cheng Tianyu's performance in the previous round. The sixteen-year-old at the late-stage Spirit Concentration level was already surprisingly strong. Leaving aside his diligence and astonishing talent, Qinglu Sword Sect had been commended for their education methods.

Even with an inevitable fight with the Tempest Sword on the horizon, Yin Biyue didn't feel any contempt for the Qinglu Sword Sect. On the contrary, he was in awe of them. Everyone knew their disciples were among the most hardworking when it came to cultivation. Yin Biyue didn't think Duan Chongxuan could easily win against Cheng Tianyu without using his talismans.

"If you don't use external aids, what are your chances?" Yin Biyue asked.

"Seventy percent." The chatterbox was very honest.

"Seventy percent chance of winning?"

"Seventy percent chance of losing."

"Ah."

It sounded embarrassing, but it was the truth. Duan Chongxuan sighed. “I watched his last match. I think that guy started training in his mother’s womb.”

Luo Mingchuan shook his head with a smile. “He just spent the time you used on storytellers and gambling on practice instead.”

Duan Chongxuan rubbed his nose. He had to admit Luo Mingchuan was right. “I really regret wasting so much time in the past. Now I can’t even beat a kid.”

Yin Biyue understood. He’d guessed a long time ago that Duan Chongxuan hailed from an extraordinary background, most likely some major house. If he grew up living in luxury and being spoiled rotten, who would force him to train through the coldest winters and hottest summers? Though Duan Chongxuan had started training like he’d been enlightened overnight since Zheng Wei’s visit, half a month’s diligence and improvement was nothing against Cheng Tianyu’s ten years of hard work.

Fortunately, Duan Chongxuan recognized his own shortcomings, which was a good quality to have on the grand path of cultivation. Yin Biyue felt the upcoming match was not hopeless.

“I read a bit about the Feathered Raiment Sword style back when I was at the academy,” Yin Biyue said. “I’ll spar with you for the next few days. Try to figure out a way to counter the moves.”

“That’s great, Sishixiong!” Duan Chongxuan’s eyes lit up.

Luo Mingchuan stepped to the side. “Don’t channel your vital qi just yet. Spar with only the sword moves. I’ll observe.”

Knowing they were putting in such effort for him, Duan Chongxuan was moved. He picked up his sword without another word.

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INSIDE WUTONG GARDEN of Qinglu Sword Sect, Song Tang sat on a stone bench under a tree, while Zhong Shan and Cheng Tianyu stood beside him.

“The fact that Duan Chongxuan could pull out twenty flame talismans means that was only a fraction of his wealth,” Song Tang said. “I imagine Xu Guang of Lianjian Sect also realized this, which is why he yielded in their match.”

Song Tang regarded his little shidi’s juvenile face and sighed to himself. Many didn’t think being young was a problem, but it was, in fact, the *biggest* problem. He knew better than anyone that at Cheng Tianyu’s age, his bones and meridians weren’t fully developed. Severe injuries could damage his foundation. His faith was also unstable; he could easily be provoked and lose composure when faced with a strong opponent.

Cheng Tianyu remained silent, having grasped his shixiong’s meaning. This would be the first time since joining the sect that he would go against his shixiong.

“No. I want to fight seriously,” he said, his eyes slightly red-rimmed.

Beside him, Zhong Shan patted his shoulder in encouragement.

Song Tang had moment of surprise before he broke into a smile. “All right, then. Fight seriously!”

He had been overthinking it. Since his little shidi had made the decision, he would respect it. After all, his shidi would have to walk his

cultivation path alone.

Song Tang picked up his sword. “Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue came out of the academy. They’ve read thousands of classics and are familiar with the strengths of various schools. You still haven’t grasped the essence of the Feathered Raiment Sword Style. The match is in three days. Until then, I will spar with you.”

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DUAN CHONGXUAN’S MATCH was the first among the three of them. That day, they walked with the rest of the Cangya disciples to the tournament grounds. That day, the maidens of Ye City and the female cultivators of Lianjian Sect arrived at the tournament grounds much earlier than the two fighters.

Only about forty pairs of matches remained in the third round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament. Just like the second round, there were no time limits or draws, and for ease of spectating, only two rings were in use every day. As the day broke, the disciples of various sects arrived one after the other. However, the morning mist still persisted and the bell had yet to ring. It wasn’t time to start the matches.

Yin Biyue noticed Duan Chongxuan wasn’t looking too good.

“Still can’t win?” he asked in a low voice.

In the past few days, Duan Chongxuan’s two shixiong had tirelessly prepared him for his match. How could he admit he couldn’t win and waste his shixiong’s effort? He opened his mouth wide to deny it.

“As if…! Did you see how he was standing two steps higher than us that day at the tavern but was still blocked by Zhong Shan? What does that tell you? That he might not even be past my shoulder!” Duan Chongxuan flapped open his fan. “I just think fighting him will make me look like I’m bullying a kid.”

Luo Mingchuan froze.

Yin Biyue’s mouth twitched. He wanted to warn the chatterbox, but it was too late. Cheng Tianyu stormed over and glared at Duan Chongxuan.

“Who are you calling a kid?!”

“Shidi,” came Song Tang’s reprimanding voice. Cheng Tianyu reluctantly hung his head and ran back to his corner.

Over at the viewing deck on the east side, the elders were already taking their seats. The administrative disciple announced, “Duan Chongxuan of the Cangya Mountains versus Cheng Tianyu of Qinglu Sword Sect!”

Song Tang patted Cheng Tianyu on the shoulder. “Go on. Fight with your all.”

Many had come to watch this match. Cheng Tianyu wasn’t the first disciple to practice the Feathered Raiment Sword under the Second Sage of Qinglu Sword Sect; Song Tang had started ten years earlier. Yet when they descended their mountain, the sword Feiyu was in Cheng Tianyu’s hands. This spoke volumes of the hope the Second Sage had placed on him, believing that his future achievements would surpass those of Song Tang.

The strong seniors wanted to see the Feathered Raiment Sword style; the disciples of Qinglu Sword Sect had come to cheer their little shidi on;

and the female cultivators of Lianjian Sect wanted to watch Duan Chongxuan fling talismans.

The two stepped into the ring and saluted each other with about ten feet between them. Yin Biyue had a feeling they were going to start with a verbal fight before the official one. His feeling was correct.

“I don’t care how many talismans you have. I won’t yield.”

“I won’t be using talismans today,” Duan Chongxuan replied seriously. “I just have a question. Have you had your crowning ceremony yet?”

The answer was the sound of Cheng Tianyu’s sword unsheathing.

“No matter what your opponent says, it’s all to provoke you. Ignore him. Only focus on your sword.”

Cheng Tianyu remembered what his shixiong had told him the day before, and his expression became solemn. Readying his stance, he said, “Please.”

Duan Chongxuan’s expression also turned serious.

“It’s good if you can provoke your opponent with words. If not, anger him with your sword.”

That was what Luo Mingchuan had told him. Duan Chongxuan tucked his folding fan into his sleeve and pulled out his sword.

“Please.”

As soon as the word dropped, he soared into the air in a single leap. A blinding streak of sword glare flashed across the ring and, accompanied by the blade’s piercing shriek, the sword slashed down toward Cheng Tianyu’s face. Fast and swift without a single sharp edge, his form was like

a feather falling from the celestial heaven above. Hidden within the light was death!

The crowd erupted in cries of disbelief.

“The Feathered Raiment Style?!”

“How does he know it?”

None of the crowd had expected Duan Chongxuan’s first attack would be his opponent’s best move.

Cheng Tianyu set his jaw, unsurprised. Before the feather form could touch him, he sprang into the air, his sword forming an arc-shaped barrier with the tip at the center.

The two swords clashed in mid-flight. The shriek of metal against metal echoed across the grounds, and powerful wind billowed from the collision of their vital qi barriers, blowing away the morning fog. Their robes fluttered violently.

“If Duan Chongxuan uses the Feathered Raiment first, don’t panic. It won’t be the real Feathered Raiment but the simplified version Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue taught him—pure form without substance.

“Compete with him head-on with vital qi. Even though your cultivation levels are similar, he’s no match against the amount and density of your vital qi!”

Cheng Tianyu’s grip on his sword was firm. *Shixiong is amazing,* he thought. *He guessed everything.*

After the initial clash, the two swords exchanged a dozen rapid blows. The sharp chiming of the swords sounded like a howling storm.

Sparks crackled from the friction, bits of it shooting out and leaving deep furrows in the ring floor.

Through the sea of people, Yin Biyue's gaze fell on the Qinglu Sword Sect on the opposite side of the ring. He knew Song Tang and Zhong Shan had anticipated his and Luo Mingchuan's first move and taught Cheng Tianyu how to counter it.

The clash of vital qi continued, but the two swords were evenly matched, neither gaining the upper hand. The sword Feiyu was as bright as an autumn lake, reflecting the sun and moon. It had once belonged to a Second Sage in his youth, and was a divine weapon of the era. However, the sword in Duan Chongxuan's hand was jet-black, as if it'd been scorched during its creation, dull and unreflective. Yet it had been able to hold its own in this clash of vital qi. It was truly astonishing.

"I thought he was some spiritual cultivator at first… I didn't expect him to actually use a sword."

"What sword is that? How can it rival Feiyu?!"

Not many disciples in the audience recognized the sword, but the elders watching from the viewing deck appeared somber at the sight of it.

"Fenghuo?" The city master arched an eyebrow from his mansion.

"You won't be able to outmatch Cheng Tianyu in a fight with vital qi, but you still have to confront him. For your next move, you need to initiate your stance first and seize the offense!"

Duan Chongxuan still remembered his Sishixiong's words. When the two swords clashed for the last time, he vanished in midair.

Striking emptiness, Cheng Tianyu's tremendous vital qi surged like the tide and slammed into the platform below, cracking the stone—but there

was not even a shadow in the clouds of dust kicked up by the blow.

"So fast!"

"Could that be Treading Lands?"

Cheng Tianyu wasn't flustered by Duan Chongxuan's disappearance. Keeping the same trajectory, he slashed straight down with indomitable force. Golden light shimmered where the sword cut through the air, flickering wildly like feathers in flight.

"Treading Lands is not footwork that can be learned in a day. If he uses it, it will still be a simplified version."

He trusted that his shixiong would not be mistaken, so Duan Chongxuan had to still be in the same spot.

Cheng Tianyu was partially right. Duan Chongxuan reappeared where Cheng Tianyu pointed his sword, but by then his own blade's momentum had formed. He dipped his wrist and swept his sword horizontally, drawing a long, straight line in the air. Pulled in by this motion, the morning mist gathered beneath his blade.

"Mist Rising Over Cangya!" chorused the Cangya disciples excitedly.

This strike was the beginner's stance of Cangya's sword style, the very first one that every martial cultivator had to practice when they joined the sect.

"To seize the offense, you must first unleash your strongest technique before Cheng Tianyu uses 'Towering Featherflight,'" Yin Biyue told him.

Duan Chongxuan looked downcast. "I can't execute my strongest technique right now."

"Then use the one you've practiced the most," said Luo Mingchuan.

Chapter 36

THE TECHNIQUE he'd practiced the most.

Thus, Duan Chongxuan chose "Mist Rising Over Cangya." The countless streams of dancing feathers lost their golden glow as mist veiled over them. Duan Chongxuan then swung his sword, changing the stance to the excited hollering of Cangya's disciples.

"Clouds Sink Below West Peaks!"

"Windswept Central Gorge!"

No one had ever strung those two moves together before, but when Duan Chongxuan executed them, they naturally complemented each other.

Cheng Tianyu was forced back a dozen steps by the force of Duan Chongxuan's attacks, and now teetered on the edge of the ring. Suddenly, he twisted his wrist, dispersing the golden light, then dragged the Feiyu sword into an angled slash, scraping along the blade of the black longsword, sending sparks flying.

A wave of excitement erupted from Qinglu Sword Sect's side this time.

"Sunset Over Qinglu!"

"Twilight Mist on Xun River!"

An elder at the viewing desk clapped his hands together. "Marvelous!"

It was marvelous indeed. Everyone in the audience felt the fight so far had been extraordinary. The sword Duan Chongxuan wielded was

extraordinary. Cheng Tianyu demonstrating such talent in the art of the sword before crowning age was extraordinary. And the most remarkable of all was countering Golden Refulgent Plumes with Mist Rising Over Cangya, and Windswept Central Gorge with Sunset Over Qinglu. If the two fighters hadn't unleashed those attacks, no one would have thought that such ordinary sword techniques linked together could have such power.

Song Tang grew solemn. They had anticipated Duan Chongxuan's every move up to this point, and their opponents likewise had predicted how they would react. From the start, this duel had been between more people than Duan Chongxuan and Cheng Tianyu. It was also the first clash of Yin Biyue and Luo Mingchuan against Song Tang and Zhong Shan!

On the opposite side of the ring, Luo Mingchuan was even more solemn. Duan Chongxuan's three linked moves had certainly broken through Golden Refulgent Plumes and forced Cheng Tianyu to retreat again and again, but he had yet to defeat the other completely.

After two more moves, Cheng Tianyu had turned the tide, and all their divining and simulations ended there.

In Duan Chongxuan's head, Luo Mingchuan's words resurfaced: *"If you still haven't won after this attack, then the rest is up to you."*

All of his attacks had been parried.

In the eastern sky, the colorful glow of morning had yet to fade, streaming its clear light upon the land. With both hands gripping the hilt, Cheng Tianyu took one step forward with his right foot. His expression was grave. A gentle breeze stirred his robes and brushed the longsword in his hand. He was still a child, yet he exhibited the unwavering resolve of a master.

He raised his weapon as sword intent began to flow between the gaps in the morning glow. Clear light filtered down like a flurry of white feathers. Many sensed the change and couldn't help but lament that despite their years, their cultivation was far inferior to this boy's.

"That really is the Towering Featherflight!"

"He's actually mastered the technique!"

When the feathers fell, Duan Chongxuan would follow in defeat. Despite that, no one laughed at him. If he lost, it wasn't because he was weak, but because Cheng Tianyu was remarkably strong. Even Song Tang, who had gained fame in his youth, hadn't been able to execute the strongest move of the Feathered Raiment Style in the Spirit Concentration state, the Towering Featherflight. In this moment, people understood that Qinglu Sword Sect's Second Sage had entrusted the Feiyu sword to this child because he was genuinely worthy.

No matter how intense the feelings of the onlookers, none could rival the feelings of Duan Chongxuan, who was facing this strike head-on.

He gazed at the mountain ridges veiled by mist in the distance, the morning radiance on the horizon, the clear light, and the feathers in wild flight. He truly had wasted so many years.

The sharp sword qi was upon him, pressing against his cheeks. In that split, critical moment, what surfaced in his mind was no longer the inferences or playthroughs from his shixiong, but words his father had once told him.

"Sometimes, when the blade is cutting deep, even when you know it is futile, you must try anyway. You won't know whether you'll lose or die until you do."

This was the second time in his life he thought his father made sense. He wanted to try.

Yin Biyue was the first to notice that Duan Chongxuan's grip on the sword had changed to move up by half an inch, as if he was no longer wielding a sword but a long spear. Duan Chongxuan closed his eyes.

Surprise colored the faces of the crowd, who were unsure of what he was about to do. Could Towering Featherflight have driven him mad? The imminent strike wouldn't disappear just because he closed his eyes!

Yin Biyue frowned. Duan Chongxuan said before that he "*couldn't execute his strongest technique*," but that didn't mean he didn't have one. Yin Biyue could guess what Duan Chongxuan was about to do, but he feared that forcing the issue might backfire.

Duan Chongxuan might hurt himself instead.

Eyes closed, Duan Chongxuan traced his memories and twirled his 'spear.' The stance was odd, but it quieted the crowd. The streams of feathers in flight trembled and began to pull away. Duan Chongxuan's eyes flashed open, his aura transformed—it was as though he now donned armor, ready for a decisive battle.

The spear thrust forward!

The air, already rippling between the countless feathers, was split once more with a long gash. The piercing howls of the sword's—no, the spear's—cry tore through the land like a cavalry of thousands thundering across the mountains and the rivers to meet the enemy.

Duan Chongxuan had withheld this move not to save it as a last resort, but because even he didn't know if he was capable of executing it. But now, he'd done it.

The beacon lit, the smoke rises—metal spears and armored horses, surging vigor like a tiger's ambush.[30]

The majesty of the emperor and the aura of the dragon and tiger dissolved into this one mighty strike. The crowd gasped. Upon the viewing deck, that elder finally confirmed his guess.

"It *is* Fenghuo, the Beacon Fire!"

Song Tang's heart sank as he watched the match play out. He knew the worst had happened—Duan Chongxuan had made a breakthrough at the critical juncture of battle. His shidi was still too young.

He had never feared his shidi losing. Rather, he feared his shidi couldn't learn how to retreat. The sect's long-cherished ambition, the Feiyu sword's fame, and even their venerable master's high expectations—all were burdens heavy enough to crush his youthful, frail shoulders. His little shidi who had grown up under such pressure had always placed the honor of the sect first. For certain, he would rather sustain heavy injuries than retreat.

Facing what seemed to be a cavalry of thousands, Cheng Tianyu knew his sword momentum had weakened and Duan Chongxuan's sword intent was blazing. Defeat was a foregone conclusion. Yet his expression remained resolute and fearless.

Just when Duan Chongxuan's strike was about to descend upon him, Cheng Tianyu abruptly backed away. He braced with his sword, and the momentum of Feiyu changed sharply, carving a way out through the trampling of the army horde.

"Sometimes, retreating requires more wisdom and courage than advancing."

At the last second, his shixiong's words surfaced in his head. Cheng Tianyu had retreated. He stood with difficulty, leaning on his sword. It struck him after the fact that in withdrawing intact from that attack, he had drained the last of his vital qi and mental strength. It was easy to imagine the sort of severe injuries he would've sustained had he not backed away.

The sword's cry halted and the momentum dissipated like the withdraw of troops, revealing a fissure underfoot on the stone platform. Duan Chongxuan wiped away the blood trailing from the corner of his lips.

"You've conceded."

A few gasps of surprise sounded from the crowd, snapping the rest out of their shock. They joined the chorus of awe.

"Do you know what technique that was?"

"I don't know, I've never seen it before."

"It looked more like a spear technique."

Anyone could tell *"You've conceded"* was a polite remark, meant to allow Cheng Tianyu his dignity, but Cheng Tianyu shook his head. "I didn't concede. I lost."

He sheathed his sword and stepped down from the ring, where Song Tang and Zhong Shan were waiting to support him.

Cheng Tianyu hung his head. "Shixiong, I lost."

"No, you did very well," Zhong Shan said.

Song Tang stroked his head with a smile. "You did not lose composure when your opponent provoked you, nor did you stubbornly refuse to retreat. You overcame yourself."

At this, Cheng Tianyu broke into a smile as well, just as the disciples of Qinglu Sword Sect came forward to congratulate their little shidi.

Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue helped Duan Chongxuan down from the platform. Although he had won, the last strike had proved too much and showed signs of backlash. Duan Chongxuan waved dismissively that he was fine, though he was spitting blood when he laughed. The Cangya disciples laughed along with him, while the female cultivators of Lianjian Sect handed him their handkerchiefs with rosy cheeks.

A gentle wind stirred the shadows of the elm trees. The summer sun was lovely, much like these young people in the prime of their youth. In the ups and downs of their lives, the Flower-Plucking Tournament would gradually fade into an insignificant, trivial event. But something would always last in their memories: Once, a duel at the foot of Mount Chongming had no real losers.

Chapter 37

THE BATTLE BETWEEN Duan Chongxuan and Cheng Tianyu was the Flower-Plucking Tournament's peak, whether in terms of spectacle or educational value. Not to mention it was incredible fodder for storytelling, enriching the entertainment of Ye City's citizens.

Cheng Tianyu, famed at a young age, walked the world with the sword of Qinglu Sword Sect's Second Sage. Duan Chongxuan was the Sword Sage's disciple in name but more widely believed to be Headmaster-xiansheng's favored kin. Gossiping about Sages was off-limits, but these young prodigies made for interesting conversation. Some also noticed the four other shadows behind that fated duel—it had felt like a confrontation between the Qinglu Sword Sect and the Cangya Mountains.

Regardless of how the world was spinning their tales, that night, the main characters of the story decided to sit on a rooftop and drink to the moon. Duan Chongxuan thought this was the best day of his life, though his exhausted mind drew a blank when he tried to explain why. Rather than think too hard, he bought three large jugs of Drunken Immortal wine and three wine bowls.

Yin Biyue didn't drink—or more accurately, he'd never been drunk before. Nonetheless, he was also in high spirits and longed for the dauntless passion of their third shixiong's "down in the dumps in the jianghu, wandering and indulging in drink" energy. Beside him sat Luo Mingchuan who, even when holding a crudely oversized wine bowl, sat poised and proper with not a sleeve out of place. He retained all the mannerisms of a gentleman if one could ignore the blush warming his ears.

They were sitting too close together. Enough to catch one another's breathing. Enough to feel each other's body heat. Luo Mingchuan was reminded of that day, walking in the small alleyways, when his shidi had supported him back to Qiushui Lake.

Fortunately, Duan Chongxuan's broken speech streamed without end, so the awkwardness wasn't *too* obvious. He sprawled out on the roof, hugging a wine jug with one dangling leg crossed over the other. As his words became increasingly slurred, he seemed intoxicated by the moon itself.

"'The Beacon Fire.' I can't believe I did it. How'd I do it though…? I always thought I couldn't. Truly my dad's son—real flesh and blood… I'm such a fan of myself… Dad, I miss you…"

Yin Biyue thought Duan Chongxuan was an utter embarrassment. How old was he, calling for his father while drunk? If the Ye City ladies saw him like this, he wouldn't have to worry about their attentions much longer. Luo Mingchuan simply shook his head, smiling.

Duan Chongxuan stood up all at once and walked to the edge of the eaves. The night breeze stirred his belt into a dance and swept up his sleeves. He opened his arms as though to ascend on the wind. Facing the moon, he belted out a song with shockingly clear diction and correct intonation.

"Looking at the deep gorge, I lament the vastness of separation; atop the lofty peaks, I grieve the distance yet untraveled… Here, the stream of stars slants to the left, the northern constellations glide to the south; white dew veils the sky, a pure moon drifts across the heavens. I recite these verses, earnestly presenting my words…"[31]

Just when Yin Biyue thought he had sobered up, he tumbled off the roof. Moments later, a muffled voice shouted “I’m okay!” which was then followed by the sound of him opening and closing his room’s door.

Only two now remained on the roof, along with the luminescent moon. The night air carried the scent of water mingled with grass and earth from the nearby shimmering Qiushui Lake. Far away shone the warm light of Ye City’s tall buildings and streets. A view such as this, enveloped by the soothing wind, was enough to make anyone forget their troubles for a time. Even though the path of cultivation was long and all the dangers remained —in light and in shadows—so what?

Live in the moment and enjoy.

Yin Biyue had not been neutralizing the alcohol in his system with his vital qi, so he was on the edge of inebriated. He had initially planned on having a chat with Luo Mingchuan after the third round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament had concluded, since the chatterbox thought something was amiss in Luo Mingchuan’s eyes. A problem with his mental state.

Perhaps the alcohol gave Yin Biyue courage; he suddenly felt that no time was like the present.

Luo Mingchuan watched as Yin Biyue set down his wine bowl and met his gaze squarely.

“Let’s talk.”

Taken aback, Luo Mingchuan replied, “Sure.”

“Shixiong, have you been feeling down lately?”

Luo Mingchuan thought he must also be drunk. He smiled helplessly. “No.”

“Impossible! Eyes don’t lie!” exclaimed Yin Biyue. If he’d been sober, he would never have uttered his opinion aloud.

The smile on Luo Mingchuan’s face froze, the taste of the bowl of Drunken Immortal he’d drunk turning bitter on his tongue. His shidi had noticed…but how? Had he underestimated him? He would have to be more careful in the future.

Luo Mingchuan’s mental state was fine—he had just started practicing the second stage of the Ghara Pupil Technique. Zheng Wei’s killing intent was terrifying, but it hadn’t been enough to rattle Luo Mingchuan. What truly threatened him was his current lack of power. He couldn’t retaliate against the will of the strong and protect his shidi from harm.

The Ghara Pupil Technique was a peculiar art. It was hard to believe it was orthodox Buddhist magic. However, if it was the fastest path to ascending his level, he had no other choice.

Luo Mingchuan locked eyes with Yin Biyue. The night deepened into ink, yet it couldn’t compare to the profoundness of his expression.

“Shidi,” he said. “I’m not feeling down, nor is there anything wrong with me.”

Yin Biyue thought he must’ve drunk too much; he’d actually swooned for a moment. But if there was nothing wrong with Luo Mingchuan, that was all that mattered.

Yin Biyue topped his bowl up and turned his gaze to the bright moon above, recalling that night. When he returned from the academy, the moon had been just as resplendent, like a clear silver platter. Since descending the mountain and entering the world, much had happened, both huge and

insignificant matters alike. He had met many people, some whom he disliked and others he admired. He had companions who fought alongside him, a Shixiong and Shijie on Xihua Peak waiting for his return, and a great-value master who was somewhere in the world doing something… great.

This was good. He didn't know how to describe this feeling. It was as if, here, he'd truly lived for the first time. He was happy. So happy that he drank bowl after bowl of wine, until there were two moons in the sky.

He didn't want to live out the *BFFs in the first half, then the villain backstabs the protagonist in the second half* script anymore. Luo Mingchuan was his companion, not just some protagonist. He didn't want to be a villain anymore either. He only wanted to live a peaceful life in this world.

Unbeknownst to Yin Biyue, many things in life were beyond one's control.

Ye City was in the northern part of the Southern Continent, where the temperature difference between night and day was extreme. After midnight, the wind only grew colder. Yin Biyue started to feel it but didn't think to circulate his vital qi. Instead, he found drinking to be warming. When he realized his own wine jug was empty, he reached for the one beside him.

When a cool breath suddenly touched his arms, Luo Mingchuan froze. The person beside him took the wine jug and was about to withdraw when Luo Mingchuan stayed his hand. Perhaps the evening wind was overly brisk, but his voice was trembling a little.

"Shidi, excessive drinking is harmful. You mustn't drink anymore."

Yin Biyue found the temperature of the fingers holding his hand and the warmth that enveloped him both familiar and strangely comforting. His last thought before his consciousness faded was, *How warm.*

Luo Mingchuan sat frozen on the roof. Moonlight fell upon the young man cradled in his arms, his cascade of white hair brimming with light, his complexion as cool as snow falling on a towering pavilion. Only his thin lips were a vivid red, as striking as red plum blossoms against the white frost.

With the crisp fragrance of wine and cold air, eyes closed, Yin Biyue murmured in Luo Mingchuan’s arms.

He leaned in to catch the words, then he fell still. Lights on the distant shore slowly extinguished, leaving the long night to grow peaceful. In the darkness, the moonlight seemed almost like daylight. His voice was soon carried away by the wind.

“Shidi, for as long as I live, I, Luo Mingchuan, will protect you.”

Chapter 38

YIN BIYUE OPENED HIS EYES to the flowing silk canopy above his head and the faint scent of calming incense drifting in the air. The refreshing smell instantly woke him. His mind drew a blank for a moment before he bolted up and started pounding the bed in humiliation. He remembered everything that had happened the night before and felt like his brain was filled with the dregs of Drunken Immortal.

I got smashed… I got smashed and tried to talk to Luo Mingchuan about life! Nothing even came of it! I can't believe I believed everything he said and tried to grab his wine! And then fell asleep! But never mind falling asleep, I even grabbed his sleeve and told him "I just want to live a peaceful life." Am I stupid?! How could I blurt out something that could expose my identity?

Wait, what happened after that? Why am I not on the roof right now? Chatterbox fell off the roof. Luo Mingchuan must've hauled him back. Did I make a fool of myself? Did I yell or make any villainous declarations? Did I drool on him?!

HOW EMBARRASSING!

Yin Biyue was wallowing neck-deep in self-loathing when a familiar voice sounded from the yard.

"Shidi, are you up…?"

Without thinking, Yin Biyue shouted back, "I'm not here!"

There was silence.

His life was a tragedy.

Yin Biyue almost grabbed his sword and stabbed himself. He must have painted a majestic image of a dumbass in Luo Mingchuan's mind.

Crawling out of bed bearing a wooden expression, he straightened his clothes in the mirror—reciting all the while in his head: *I'm not here I'm not here I'm not here*—before he silently opened the door.

Standing beneath the tree and smiling as usual, Luo Mingchuan didn't have a trace of mockery on his face.

A glimmer of hope rose in Yin Biyue. Maybe he hadn't made a fool of himself the night before. Maybe no one had heard him yell just now.

Duan Chongxuan opened his door and poked his head out. Sounding surprised, he asked, "Huh? Sishixiong? I thought you weren't here?"

Yin Biyue's mouth twitched.

Duan Chatterbox: a disgrace to the sect.

Thankfully, Luo Mingchuan coughed softly before any violence occurred. "Since you're both up, let's go."

Of course, Luo Mingchuan had a match today. He and Duan Chongxuan had promised they'd go watch. A wave of guilt washed over Yin Biyue. He regretted dragging Luo Mingchuan into drinking and gabbing. His third shixiong was right! Alcohol was trouble!

Duan Chongxuan also had a hangdog expression. Luo Mingchuan chuckled.

"I had a bit of drink last night and slept exceptionally well. I woke up feeling refreshed and energized."

"Oh? Good," said Yin Biyue, feeling somewhat comforted. "Let's go then."

When Yin Biyue took his place below the ring and watched as Luo Mingchuan and his opponent exchanged a salute, he felt he was even more focused than Luo Mingchuan. In the first round of the tournament, Luo Mingchuan had faced Wang Zhen of Baopu Sect and lashed him with the academy's disciplinary whip using his sword as a rod. In the second round, Yin Biyue got a lucky break and spent the time breaking through his cultivation barrier in seclusion rather than dueling, so he hadn't seen Luo Mingchuan face Puhong of Xingshan Temple. Apparently they debated the philosophies of Buddhism, and Puhong yielded in the end. Both the disciplinary whip and Buddhist sutras were techniques from an outside school that couldn't have demonstrated Luo Mingchuan's own expertise. Yin Biyue really wanted to see what other techniques Luo Mingchuan had up his sleeves, and what his best move was.

Yin Biyue scanned the crowd. He noticed Song Tang, Zhong Shan, and Cheng Tianyu were all sitting in Qinglu Sword Sect's corner. On Baopu Sect's side, aside from Zheng Wei, everyone had shown up. It would appear Luo Mingchuan's companions weren't the only ones who wanted to know him better. His opponents—and even his enemies—did too.

In terms of cultivation level alone, Luo Mingchuan was the highest among the Cangya disciples present, and rumored to be the one most likely to defeat Zhong Shan and win the tournament. Thus, even though this match seemed like certain victory, the number of spectators was truly considerable.

In front of Luo Mingchuan stood a disciple hailing from the Western Continent's borderlands. Although his sect wasn't famous, his personal cultivation was decent and his salute was proper.

"I've long admired Luo-shixiong. It's an honor to face you today."

Duan Chongxuan leaned close to Yin Biyue. “He’s a spiritual cultivator with a rare spiritual meridian. His technique is also uncommon. He defeated a disciple of Lianjian Sect in the previous round.”

Yin Biyue nodded and watched as Luo Mingchuan returned the courtesy.

“You flatter me. Please.”

The disciple didn’t waste any more time. He raised his right hand a few inches, his fingers twisting in a hand seal. Countless droplets of water appeared before him and converged into a thin veil like the surface of Qiushui Lake, reflecting his outline.

“His hand seal speed sure is fast,” remarked Duan Chongxuan.

It was. In the blink of an eye, the water veil blossomed to thirty feet in size. It almost looked like a vertical lake had appeared in the ring. As it grew, the air around the platform dried up. All at once, a thousand water arrows shot through the cascade. The projectiles were made of water, but because of the sheer speed and tremendous amount of vital qi contained within, the arrows screeched as they pierced through the sky.

Luo Mingchuan swept his sleeve. With a howling wind, the arrows stopped mere feet away from him and fell to the ground, splashing by his feet like so many fat raindrops.

Not a drop landed on his robe.

Using a vital qi barrier was simple; Yin Biyue had seen Luo Mingchuan use it back at Panlong Ridge. Unlike martial cultivators who fought with weapons, the pace of a fight between spiritual cultivators was generally slower. Even after ten minutes, the two were still exchanging blows, one move at a time.

Just when many were under the impression that the outcome was certain—that Luo Mingchuan would simply wear down his opponent with his superior vital qi—there was a shift. Yin Biyue noticed the disciple was sweating harder and harder. His expression grew restless as he was obviously pushed to his limit. He was about to bring out his trump card.

Sure enough, a voice in the crowd cried out: “Fog?!”

Fog had risen and permeated the grounds. This was not morning fog nor the sort that the wind could disperse. As the condensation thickened, whiteness caged the ring. Even when Yin Biyue cloaked his eyes with vital qi, he couldn’t see through it. Many others were in the same boat, seeing only a vast expanse of white. The machinations taking place within the ring became imperceptible.

“What technique is this?” Duan Chongxuan wondered aloud.

Yin Biyue narrowed his eyes. He released his spiritual sense, using his powerful soul to see. “‘Fog-Veiled Tower’ and ‘Confounding Moonlit Ferry.’”

Duan Chongxuan cleared his throat softly. “Sishixiong, I’m not as well-read as you, so…?”

“They’re techniques developed during the Age of Sages,” Yin Biyue explained. “Those with a particular variation of the water-element spiritual meridian can transform water into fog and obscure their opponent’s senses. This attack is known as ‘Fog-Veiled Tower.’ This disciple’s level isn’t quite there yet, but if it were high enough, he could fabricate illusions within the fog, which is the ‘Confounding Moonlit Ferry.’”

“Wow, I’ve never seen anything like it before! Seems his spiritual meridian is unique indeed.”

Yin Biyue saw Luo Mingchuan make the wind-summoning hand seal. The weeds near the platform stirred, but the fog was so dense that not even the wind could penetrate it. For a moment, Yin Biyue shifted nervously.

Since they couldn’t see, the audience could only murmur their speculations.

But Luo Mingchuan could see. With a high enough level, his Ghara Pupil Technique (known as the “Omniscient Eye” in Buddhist sects) could pierce through all techniques and barriers. At his current level, even without his activating the technique, the hand seals appeared to him in slow motion—never mind the fog.

He could also see his shidi staring intently at him with a concerned look from below the ring. His brow was furrowed, serious and focused, as if he were the only one present. Luo Mingchuan’s hand seal movements dragged for a second.

Inside the fog, arrows appeared from nothing and rained from every direction without a trace or a sound. It should have been enough to catch anyone off guard and throw them into a panic. However, Luo Mingchuan’s expression remained unchanged. He swept his sleeve again to block the arrows, though he didn’t disperse the dense mist.

After he’d completed his set of hand seals, a veil of water appeared before him—the exact same as the opponent’s. The same, but more powerful. Under the cover of fog, no one had noticed it gathering. Even the disciple was shocked. How had he not seen through the fog of his own creation? He assumed Luo Mingchuan had used some sort of method to redirect the arrows, turning them against him.

“The fog still hasn’t dispersed. Is the technique that powerful?”

“Not even the chief disciple of Cangya can do anything about it?”

Yin Biyue was confused, because he hadn’t noticed the curtain of water in front of Luo Mingchuan either. If Luo Mingchuan couldn’t see through the fog, how had he erected such a flawless defense? If he *could* see that his opponent was so close, why wasn’t he attacking directly?

No matter how slow the pace of a fight, it had to end sometime. At last, the fog dispersed, revealing the two behind the veil. The disciple was drained of color, bent at the waist, and panting hard. He was unhurt, just exhausted. He didn’t understand why Luo Mingchuan had dragged out the match when he could’ve defeated him much sooner. Then it occurred to him that Luo-shixiong was kindhearted and wanted to spare him some embarrassment.

“I concede,” the disciple said, grateful.

Luo Mingchuan cupped his hands and saw the disciple out of the ring. He showed no joy nor pride, not to mention post-match fatigue. Neither his hair nor his sleeves were out of place; he looked as he had before the match started.

Cheng Tianyu frowned. “Did he wear his opponent down using his superior cultivation level and sheer amount of vital qi? If the other person had a higher level, wouldn’t he be helpless?”

Song Tang shook his head. “From what I know, he has at least a dozen ways to overcome such situations. As for why he didn’t use any of them, maybe he was hiding his strength. He may not want to reveal his moves too soon.” He turned to Zhong Shan. “Luo Mingchuan has studied the arts of hundreds of schools. His methods are unpredictable and he is

composed. I believe that if you want to win the tournament, he will be your toughest opponent."

Zhong Shan's expression didn't change, but the knuckles of his hand gripping his sword turned white.

Unlike the others, who were busy speculating on the hidden depths behind what appeared to be certain victory, Yin Biyue looked up at the blinding sun. Today was Major Heat in solar terms—the height of summer. Decayed grass had transformed into fireflies, but the heavy rain had yet to come.[32] He couldn't forget that Luo Mingchuan got heatstroke easily…and he had stood for so long under the sun just now.

Shixiong, are you feeling dizzy? Need someone to help support you back? Yin Biyue imagined asking. He looked around at the crowded grounds and changed his mind. *No, that question's undignified. Shixiong would lose face.*

Luo Mingchuan stepped down from the ring and was immediately crowded by Cangya disciples wishing to congratulate him. He nodded at every one of them, then noticed Yin Biyue, who seemed a bit out of it.

"Shidi, are you all right?"

Yin Biyue pondered for a moment, then replied, "I just remembered something I need to take care of. Shixiong, will you go with me?"

Before Luo Mingchuan could answer, He Yanyun and Ruan Xiaolian's eyes lit up.

"Of course he would!"

Every disciple there had received an embroidered handkerchief. Sharing a knowing look filled with a secret joy, they urged, "Luo-shixiong,

hurry and go with Yin-shixiong." Then they eagerly pushed Luo Mingchuan toward Yin Biyue.

Duan Chongxuan let out a soft cough and nodded at Yin Biyue.

He Yanyun watched as the pair walked away side by side. Their sleeves swayed gently in the wind, occasionally brushing against one another, until they disappeared from sight.

She sighed. "How wonderful. When will Luo-shixiong and Yin-shixiong join in union?"

"They're lovely together, but why do I feel…hurt?" someone responded.

"Duan-shixiong, how do you see it?"

"I see it from the side… I've gotten used to it," Duan Chongxuan said, fanning himself.

***

YIN BIYUE LED Luo Mingchuan away, though he sensed the mood behind them was a little odd. When they reached Ye City, they took a detour through the secluded alleyway they had used before.

Now that there was no one around, Yin Biyue asked, "Shixiong, it's extremely hot today. Are you…feeling unwell at all?"

Luo Mingchuan paused, then he quickly remembered the excuse he had given the other day. At once, he was both baffled and amused—and moved. Not only had Yin Biyue firmly believed him, it had stayed on his mind.

He felt a little guilty for lying. He almost replied with *I'm fine. Last time was a coincidence.* Yet when he opened his mouth to speak, he said, "Actually, I am feeling a bit unwell. I'll have to trouble you again, Shidi."

Yin Biyue had to hide his smile. *I knew it! I'm so smart!* ~ € (≧▽≦) / ~

Chapter 39

OVER THE FOLLOWING DAYS, other than attending Zhong Shan's match as a group of three, they spent the rest of their time focused on cultivation. This lasted until the time arrived for Yin Biyue to take the stage.

His opponent was Chen Yi of Lianjian Sect, a disciple under the Second Sage of Lianjian. Counting the match between Duan Chongxuan and Cheng Tianyu, this was the second time that a disciple of the Sword Sage would face a disciple of a Second Sage.

Chen Yi's good luck had held when drawing lots so far; the gap between him and his past opponents had been so great that he'd won easily without showing any advanced techniques. Those matches were unremarkable and failed to generate much excitement. This upcoming one with Yin Biyue would be the first time he faced a formidable opponent.

Chen Yi and Chu Huan, one a martial cultivator, the other a spiritual cultivator, were the likeliest candidates from Lianjian Sect to win the tournament. Whether it was due to this or some other reason, the grounds were unusually crowded with disciples from Lianjian Sect, forming large waves of a purple-silk ocean.

The seating arrangements up at the viewing deck had changed as well, since a strong female elder from Lianjian Sect, a cultivator halfway to Great Ascension, had shown up. The sudden appearance of such a prominent figure should have drawn attention, but almost everyone was staring behind her, where a young girl was standing.

Her deep purple sleeves fluttered in the morning breeze, and the sun's rays cast a light sheen of gold upon her jade-like face. She was a slender lilac bearing a bud, filling the air with her sweet fragrance before blooming. The viewing deck was tall and far away, and many could only see her vague silhouette. Nevertheless, they all had a feeling that she was a beauty beyond compare.

"Is that Qu Duiyan?"

"She really *is* stunning… Is she here to watch Chen-shixiong?"

The disciples of Lianjian all wore expressions of pride and honor.

The administrative disciple was also so transfixed by the distant beauty that he nearly forgot to announce the start of the duel. The world itself just about forgot the two main fighters of this match. As they stood in the ring and faced each other, it was a fitting moment for some conversation.

The first to speak was Chen Yi.

"Yin-shixiong, I know of you," he started. "I joined my sect two years after graduating from Lanyuan Academy. While at the academy, I read your essay 'On the Usefulness of Miscellaneous Studies' from the Debates course."

Yin Biyue listened quietly and nodded in acknowledgment. To discuss your opponent's past before the start of the duel wasn't for fostering friendship.

Chen Yi continued. "As I've only been in my sect for two years, if I lose to you today, it will not be because my master's instruction is lacking. It will be because I did not learn as well as you at the academy."

"That's reasonable," Yin Biyue agreed.

It really was. Likewise, Yin Biyue had never seen the face of the Sword Sage. He had relied on self-teaching for sword practice and cultivation, so if he lost to anyone, it wouldn't be a reflection on the Sword Sage's teachings.

Chen Yi smiled. He had a calm temperament and unremarkable features. Even the somewhat-ostentatious long robes of Lianjian Sect looked modest on him. Anyone who saw him walking down the street would never guess he was a disciple of a Second Sage.

"Regardless, my loss would still damage my master's reputation." He laughed, suddenly radiating an unparalleled confidence and frankness. "So I have to win against you today."

Yin Biyue didn't respond, his eyes straying to the elm beside the ring. After his match with He Lai, half of this large elm had wilted. Later, thanks to the influence of Chu Huan's Rejuvenation of the Withered during his match, the tree regained its vitality. Now, its tender green buds trembled with the morning's gusts, as if it was early spring again.

The Halfway Great Ascensioner had come, and so had the spiritual sense of a Great Ascensioner. Yin Biyue broke off a branch of the elm. What if he had to face Zhong Shan in the future? Would he have to fight with a broken branch then too?

For now, he didn't want his opponent to misunderstand, so he explained himself. "I don't mean to insult you with this."

Others might not have believed him, but Chen Yi also graduated from the academy and had read Yin Biyue's essays. Looking into his eyes, Chen Yi thought he must have some unspoken difficulty preventing him from drawing his sword.

“It’s all right. That means I’m at an advantage,” he said.

The administrative disciple finally remembered to announce the match. “Yin Biyue of the Cangya Mountains versus Chen Yi of Lianjian Sect!”

The two exchanged salutes.

The crowd’s attention was yanked back to the two fighters. They were surprised to find the Sword Sage’s disciple still wasn’t using his sword. Because of Yin Biyue’s previous performance, no one accused him of overconfidence this time. Instead, they considered this a display of self-assurance.

Luo Mingchuan frowned slightly. He had a feeling that his shidi was keeping his sword sheathed because drawing it would cause a problem, not because he was proud.

The female elder of Lianjian Sect up at the viewing deck also frowned. She turned to the girl behind her. “Even with unrivaled confidence, one should never abandon their advantages. Do not follow his example.”

“I understand, Aunt,” replied the girl. Her soft smile glowed like a pearl, bright but not blinding. It was very pleasant to behold.

With her level of cultivation, she had no reason to be at the viewing deck. Yet here she was, watching the matches alongside elders in the Small Ascension state and above, without any of them chasing her out. In fact, they wished they could provide her with a chair. She was, after all, Qu Duiyan—the Second Sage Qu Jiang’s only daughter and the uncrowned princess of Lianjian Sect.

Although Qu Duiyan had agreed with her aunt, as she watched the white-haired young man standing in the ring with a branch, she found his indomitable spirit exhilarating. Of course, her shidi Chen Yi was also incredibly dashing, drawing his blade and slashing without hesitation.

Chen Yi used a changdao named Shuanglan—*frosted mist*. It was four feet in length and forged with the sands of Sunkenstar and highly refined steel. In the millennium after the Sword Sage gained fame, the world's martial cultivators had revered the sword, while other weapons were regarded as inferior. Aside from Yan Xing with his water slasher, Duanshui, the world would be hard-pressed to find a stronger dao-wielder.

Chen Yi's changdao, like his person, was unremarkable from its stance to its strike—neither fast nor slow. It lacked flaws but also lacked brilliance. From a distance of a hundred feet away, he slashed at Yin Biyue. This strike marked the beginning of the highly anticipated match, yet it deeply disappointed the spectators. Unlike Qu Duiyan, no one in the crowd found Chen Yi dashing at all.

As he faced the blade, Yin Biyue's expression hardened. The moment Chen Yi began his stance, a wave of power gushed from the blade like the sea, crashing toward Yin Biyue. The strike wasn't swift; instead, it surged like an unstoppable tsunami from the blade, ready to submerge the entire ring in one splash.

Bracing with a branch was akin to riding out a tempest at sea in a rowboat or illuminating the long night with a firefly's glow. In that moment, Yin Biyue realized that even if he could escape unscathed from He Lai's Eight Trigrams Sword, he could not evade Chen Yi's attack: "Vast Sea."

With nowhere to go, he had to strike.

Yin Biyue lightly jumped with his toes and vaulted to meet the attack. The tender leaves scattered off the elm branch but were held aloft by the turbulent energy in the air, unable to fall. Amid the whirlwind of flying leaves, the thin, frail branch met the heavy changdao.

Boom!

The clash between the branch and the dao resounded like a breaker crashing against the shore. Those with weaker cultivation in the audience felt their eardrums ache and had to scramble to circulate their vital qi to shield themselves. It had taken Yin Biyue's parry for people to realize the strength of Chen Yi's attack.

There had been no speed, no brilliance, no sharpness. Only strength. Pure strength.

Finally, people began to understand what Qu Duiyan saw, and they were too shocked for words.

How could a rowboat hold back the sea? How could a firefly's light illuminate the long night? Yin Biyue dipped his wrist and dragged the branch across the changdao, spraying sparks and wood chips, as he parted the sea. In the blink of an eye, the roaring sound of split waves echoed across the ground. It had happened so fast that the single, deafening boom sounded as if he was trying to cleave the sea in two.

He had struck twenty-one times at this point, yet Chen Yi had only used one move.

The Lianjian Sect elder praised Chen Yi succinctly: "A fine dao."

Of course, a Small Ascensioner halfway to Great Ascension would not be moved by the momentum of a Breakthrough cultivator. What she saw was the dao's intent.

Unlike the sword, the dao—a *knife*—was one of the earliest weapons used by humans. It was simple and therefore useful. Chopping wood, hunting, slaughtering chickens, and butchering sheep all required the dao. Chen Yi's dao was simple, just as his strike. Sometimes, extreme simplicity signified immense strength.

Qu Duiyan also thought the dao was excellent. As a fellow disciple taught by the same master, she knew the attack was Chen Yi's strongest move. She hadn't expected him to unleash it without hesitation at the start.

Admittedly, the timing was perfect. With his vital qi at its peak and his battle intent ablaze, it was the best time to unleash the dao's full potential. When fighting against a weaker opponent, one should still use one's full strength, and in battle the first move should be the strongest move. This showed that he not only understood the dao, he also understood combat.

Luo Mingchuan was one of the first to understand that vast sea. His expression remained calm while he watched the ring, but under the cover of his sleeves, his hands were clenched into fists.

The dao and the sword parted. The branch Yin Biyue wielded shortened by a mere knuckle length, but he noticed. As the great waves receded, the jagged brown reefs and the winding beach revealed their true, wretched shapes.

The momentum of Chen Yi's first move had passed and his second move had yet to come. In that brief pause in time, Yin Biyue's figure blurred, escaping from the edges of the dao's blade. He poured his vital qi into his footwork, though it rapidly depleted his mental strength. In the next moment, his form—even his breath—completely vanished from the ring.

“Treading Lands!” came the chorus of excited gasps.

This was the true Treading Lands. What Yin Biyue had shown during his match with He Lai was but a tenth of the technique’s power.

Chen Yi was unruffled and did not hesitate to withdraw his dao at the same speed and angle. He acted as though Yin Biyue’s disappearance didn’t matter. In his eyes, there was only the dao. Once withdrawn, he leveled the dao with his chest. He was ready.

If only ten people in the past millennium had read “On ‘Treading Lands’” in the academy’s library, then Chen Yi was one of them. Whether it be the secrets of time and space or star trajectory predictions, they were all based on Headmaster-xiansheng’s most powerful method: calculation.

Chen Yi hadn’t been able to learn Treading Lands, but understanding it was enough. He knew that given Yin Biyue’s present cultivation level, he would not last past five minutes with such intense exhaustion of his mental strength.

Chen Yi’s blade gleamed like a mirror, reflecting the blue skies above with wisps of clouds drifting by. After “Vast Sea” came “Clear Skies.”

Countless dao glares shot outward, the sharp streaks cutting through every inch of space in the ring. Yin Biyue had to calculate their trajectories nonstop. Never mind errors—the slightest delay would allow the dao glares to slice him open.

This was a move that flowed naturally, complemented by the heavens, and aligned perfectly with cultivators’ aesthetics. Everyone thought Chen Yi’s counterattack was masterful, for under clear skies, where could one hide?

Chapter 40

AT THIS POINT in the duel, Chen Yi had struck twice, while Yin Biyue had delivered twenty-one blows, and the fight seemed to have entered a stalemate. The tournament ground was silent; everyone was holding their breath, waiting. Would Yin Biyue be the first to emerge from thin air and lunge to break the deadlock? Or would Chen Yi's dao reach him first? Between immense reckoning and the tremendous dao, which would prove the winner?

Unexpectedly, what came first was neither a sword nor bloodshed, but the clear and melodious cry of a crane descending from the celestial heavens above, invigorating all who heard it. A white crane broke through the clouds and dove from over a hundred feet in the air. As though its wings pulled clouds and thunder from the clear skies, it stirred up a fierce gale and plunged toward Chen Yi.

Many were astonished. Did Mount Chongming have cranes? How had they never heard of this before?

Chen Yi furrowed his brow slightly. He rotated his wrist, gathering millions of streaks of dao glare into one single beam, and aimed it toward the white crane. Through the brilliance of the dao glare, the crowd finally saw that the crane was in fact Yin Biyue wielding the branch. His cascading white hair intermingled with his white Daoist robe flapping wildly in the wind resembled a crane breaking through the clouds to descend upon the mortal realm. The call of the crane had in fact been the shriek of a sword's edge cutting through the air.

A Cangya disciple recognized the attack then. “Crane Cry Above Clouds!”

“Crane Cry Above Clouds” was the second stance in the Cangya Sword Style, following “Mist Rising Over Cangya.” Every disciple practiced it when they first joined the sect, but none of them thought it could produce such power. Another cry went up, this time in disagreement. “No, it’s Windswept Central Gorge!”

The dao and the sword clashed once more. The beaming radiance of the dao’s blade, distorted by invisible vital qi, scattered like the clouds after a long rain.

The disciples turned their heads to Luo Mingchuan, anticipating his answer. Luo Mingchuan nodded with what seemed to be a twinkle in his eyes. “Both are correct.”

The crane descended from the sky, and wind rose from the sword—it had in fact been two moves that looked like one because of sheer speed. From the moment Yin Biyue dropped from the sky to when their weapons clashed, extensive intricacies had been at play, yet it all happened in an instant. This was because as he struck, his footwork still followed Treading Lands.

Chen Yi had initially frowned out of confusion. He couldn’t figure out how Yin Biyue had hidden in an entire sky of dao intent, then managed to find the opening in his dao glares to descend from it. Now, the furrow in his brow relaxed as understanding dawned on him.

In the sky were clouds, and in the clouds were birds. They were part of the sky themselves, so they had no need to hide. “Hear the truth in the

morning; die content in the evening.” So said Confucius. But Chen Yi refused to retreat or yield here.

His two most powerful moves were spent, and his vital qi was nearly drained. However, Yin Biyue had been performing immense calculations throughout the fight, exhausting his own mental strength. The vital qi in his last attack had been so immense that it was surely everything he had left.

Both were at their limits; the next clash could very well be the last one.

In truth, Yin Biyue’s condition was worse than Chen Yi imagined. Not only had Treading Lands drained his mental strength, the calculation of his previous attack’s position and angle left his mind with a skull-splitting pain. If not for his tremendous soul holding him together, he would have already dropped the branch.

With the way things looked, Yin Biyue’s decisive attack still wouldn’t be the final one. The dao glares, which had dimmed from being suppressed, vanished like a snuffed out candle. Chen Yi had withdrawn the blade of his own accord.

Yin Biyue was left with his sword brandished from above, his momentum spent. Before he fully landed, he sprang from the floor of the ring to retreat a hundred feet away—to the edge of the platform.

A sharp, whizzing noise followed beneath Yin Biyue’s feet. The crowd was shocked to find debris bursting from the ring as a fine crack split the platform and crawled all the way to within an inch of him. The sound had been the ground itself cracking.

Chen Yi had forcibly shifted the trajectory of his dao’s momentum before Clear Skies was complete! The change came too fast; Yin Biyue was

caught off guard, and his only option was to dodge.

A string of blood seeped from the corner of Chen Yi's mouth from the exertion, and his face rapidly lost color. Despite this, his eyes shone brighter than ever. He never intended to injure Yin Biyue with the change in trajectory. What he gambled for was just a second of time.

One second was enough to strike once more.

Chen Yi snapped his wrist down and used the tip of his dao to push off from the ground, launching himself high into the air. His movements were the definition of elegance, and as the tip of his blade left the ground, he swept the dao horizontally toward Yin Biyue. When he unleashed this attack, his ordinary face shone with the moon's radiance.

The situation in the ring had shifted dramatically!

"Seizing the Moon!" shouted a Lianjian Sect disciple. Soon, *everyone's* eyes shone, as if they were the ones wielding the changdao in the ring.

A thousand years ago, the Second Sage Qu Jiang had driven back enemies for three thousand miles with a single attack, "Seizing the Moon." The attack cemented Lianjian Sect's place in the world.

In the present, Chen Yi had executed the same attack with his changdao, and he had grasped its essence! It was a strike that carried the history and glory of the entire sect.

The Lianjian Sect elder started. "Your father taught him sword techniques?"

In her eyes, among the younger generation of prodigies in Lianjian Sect, Chen Yi had always seemed a little too ordinary. He had never shown any remarkable talents, and regardless of how well he executed Vast Sea and Clear Skies, it hadn't been enough to change her mind.

“Yes.” Qu Duiyan nodded with a soft smile. “But Shidi didn’t want to inherit my father’s legacy. He prefers the dao.”

A Second Sage had offered to teach him, yet he had refused to follow in his footsteps. It sounded so absurd. When she turned to gaze at that young man again, through the magnificent light of the moon on his face, she was finally able to see past his ordinary appearance and perceive the pride in his bones. Not just her—many others felt the same. Across the grounds, the prominent elders and the ordinary disciples alike saw the dignity in his strike.

With soaring ambitions, I will ascend to the skies and seize the moon![33]

Luo Mingchuan paled.

Snap!

Before the dao was upon Yin Biyue, the force that burst from the attack snapped the elm branch in his hand. Then, a longsword appeared beneath the dao’s blade—a genuine sword, not a branch. With no other choice, Yihu had unsheathed with a mournful cry!

It would seem Yihu at last resonated with its master’s heart as the dao came dangerously close.

With his elm branch severed and forced to draw his sword under pressure, Yin Biyue should’ve been flustered. In truth, he had never felt more clearheaded, more confident. Because he had a sword in his grip. Because the sword was his confidence.

This was a sentiment he hadn’t grasped before. Even when he couldn’t use this sword, he had to admit that after countless days and nights

of practice, he could no longer part with it. Since it had finally been drawn, why hesitate?

The sword slid down the dao's edge, scattering the clear light.

Chen Yi turned gray; a terrible pressure traveled from his hilt to his wrist, as if a massive mountain had landed on his dao to crush every inch of his bones and meridians.

Yin Biyue's sword had only just left its scabbard and he'd already used its most domineering attack: "Chongshan Minor," a style created by the Sword Sage himself. He witnessed Jun Yu practice this by Xihua Peak's precipice. Just as drawing the sword was his instinct when in danger, this move had been his instinctive response.

With ten thousand mountains blocking the way, how could one hope to seize the moon?

The momentum of Chen Yi's attack was nearly spent, but before he could withdraw, Yin Biyue's next attack was already upon him. The two strikes chained together with utter precision, leaving no gap between them, just as his previous two moves had. Not many could believe the Sword Sage's Chongshan Minor had been unleashed, but almost everyone recognized the second attack.

"Coldwater!"

The only move Yin Biyue had used in the previous match. From the battered ring, a chilling energy flooded forth. The sword broke through the dao with tremendous force.

This fight had seen so many twists and turns, its rhythm changing with the swiftness of summer weather. The Lianjian Sect disciples had just been entranced by the glow of the moonlight when a profound chill seized

them to their cores. Chen Yi, face pallid, swayed under the sword's momentum.

Gasps erupted from the crowd. The sword strike was so fierce that the crowd was sure blood was about to spill. Some closed their eyes, too afraid to watch. Then, without another sound, all was tranquil. No clang of metal scraping against metal, and no sword penetrating flesh. Yin Biyue's sword stopped half an inch from Chen Yi's right shoulder. His hand gripping the hilt did not shake, but his face was a little pale.

When Coldwater Blade was unleashed, it should've been unstoppable—yet it came to an abrupt halt. No one knew why except Yin Biyue himself. Yihu still refused his vital qi, so he had to draw the sword with the alternative method he'd practiced. However, this fight had exhausted him. He didn't have the power to stabilize the vital qi covering the sword.

By the time the blade was half an inch from Chen Yi, the vital qi on its surface had dispersed. He'd drawn the sword so quickly the flaw couldn't have been noticed, but had the strike landed without the power it should possess…

Fortunately, he stopped in time.

"Why?" Chen Yi was puzzled. Not just him—everyone waited for Yin Biyue's answer.

Chen Yi was as straightforward as his dao. He asked what was on his mind, just as he had blurted his words at the start of the fight.

Yin Biyue found him an opponent worthy of respect, so he decided to tell the truth. "I didn't hold back. I simply hadn't the strength."

Chen Yi looked incredulous. Yin Biyue glanced at the crowd and noticed they wore the same expression. As if they thought he was lying.

He even heard people whisper, “The sword’s momentum was as tremendous as a great river cleaving through mountains. ‘Hadn’t the strength’? Impossible.”

“Why would he risk the danger of backlash just to hold back?”

Did no one believe in the truth anymore, in this day and age?! Yin Biyue was a little annoyed.

“I’m not so kindhearted. I really hadn’t the strength!” he shouted.

‹Ding! Dear user, long time no see. The villain line “I’m not so kindhearted” appeared. Conditions met. The halo is now activated!›

Yin Biyue was utterly dumbfounded.

He could swear to the universe that he had completely forgotten he had a Fiend Halo on him! Since arriving at Ye City, his mindset had undergone many changes. When facing enemies or opponents, he hadn’t done anything like sharp glares or cold sneers or said “I was never a good person to begin with.” Now, the long-dormant halo was furiously making its presence known!

He stood in the wind, his heart filled with desolation.

I just wanna sound badass! Why did it have to activate now…?

Chapter 41

YIN BIYUE COULD SENSE the shift in mood in the tournament grounds; every pair of eyes stared at him with an immensely conflicted or complicated look. When he slid his sword back into its sheath, he saw Chen Yi chuckle and cup his hands at him in a salute.

"After today's fight, I yield."

Feeling hopeful, Yin Biyue coped with the thought that this counterfeit, knockoff halo didn't really generate that much aggro. He returned the salute. "You've conceded."

"This match is over," the administrative disciple hollered. "Yin Biyue of the Cangya Mountains wins!"

The match had been a thrilling and twisty ride of ups and downs, yet no blood had been shed, nor had anyone been hurt. Both sides had started with calm and proper salutes and ended the match the same way.

The Cangya disciples gathered around Yin Biyue as he stepped down from the ring. Their eyes showed a mix of joy and sorrow plus a hint of… exasperated disappointment? It made him downright uncomfortable.

In the next moment, he met Luo Mingchuan's eyes—still the same pure amber hue as always. The crowd parted around him.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his voice grave, though it also carried a hint of worry. It was the same question he'd asked after Yin Biyue's first match. It was comforting. No matter how this world saw him, Luo Mingchuan's view toward him never changed.

Who cares if I drew some aggro! After standing under the sun for so long, Shixiong is waiting for me to support him on the way home! ~ € (≧▽≦) / ~

Luo Mingchuan cleared his throat softly and said succinctly to the others, “There is still some business to attend to. Shidi and I will take our leave first.”

Realization dawned on the disciples.

They walked the path beneath their feet with practiced familiarity, and when they turned into the small alleyway, Yin Biyue caught hold of Luo Mingchuan’s arm. The residual sword intent of the Coldwater Blade was rampaging through his bones and meridians, making him press closer subconsciously. Abruptly, it dawned on him that this intimacy wasn’t appropriate; his perpetually well-mannered shixiong might not be comfortable with the closeness.

Just when he was about to pull away, however, he heard Luo Mingchuan say sincerely, “Thank you, Shidi.”

You’re so welcome! ~ € (≧▽≦) / ~

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THE PAIR LEFT SO SWIFTLY and without hesitation that by the time the crowd realized it, they were long gone, mere dots in the distance under the clear sky that stretched overhead. Chatter quickly rose.

He Yanyun sighed. “The way Yin-shixiong is… Thank goodness Luo-shixiong is around to keep an eye on him.”

Having a deeper understanding than most about his shixiong's personality, Duan Chongxuan didn't know how to react. "Thankfully, with Sishixiong's combat power and cultivation level, other people can't push him around."

Someone disagreed. "Sure, Yin-shixiong's cultivation is high, his combat power's exceptional, but what if someone wicked tries to deceive him? Like if they pretend to be pitiful to gain his sympathy. What then?"

"Yin-shixiong always looks so cold. Completely unfeeling, really. It's so great!"

"Yeah! Even though people misunderstand him, it'll deter those with ulterior motives."

The Cangya disciples had gathered to express deep concerns over their shixiong's personality. And what was the conclusion of the discussion?

Luo-shixiong, you must keep a close eye on him! In fact, the entire Cangya Sect must work together to make sure he's looked after!

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CHU HUAN LED a few Lianjian Sect disciples to the ring to help carry Chen Yi down. Chen Yi waved them off, signaling that they needn't worry because he wasn't injured.

Watching from the viewing deck, Qu Duiyan finally relaxed.

Suddenly, someone chanted the Buddha's name. When the elders looked, they saw it had come from one of Jiekong Temple's gray-robed high monks. Buddhist cultivators were always low-key, especially those

from Jiekong Temple. Even on bustling streets, they carried themselves as if they were inside a temple hall.

Ziming was the shidi of Jiekong Temple's abbot, and his status and cultivation were evident. As long as he didn't speak, however, people tended to overlook him. When he did speak, his voice was gentle like a summer breeze or calming like chanting a sutra.

"Amitabha Buddha. My great shishu used to say that when Buddhist disciples walk the world, we should not always concede out of compassion but practice having a compassionate heart paired with an iron fist. I hadn't understood until today that he was referring to someone like Benefactor Yin."

His speech filled the crowd with a myriad of emotions, and they were momentarily at a loss for words. Then the Baopu Sect elder snorted.

"How is that compassion? It's *softheartedness*! He'll never amount to anything in the future. I can't believe the Sword Sage would have such a disciple," he muttered.

Suddenly, he felt a chill down his back. When he jerked his head around, he saw the Lianjian Sect elder glaring at him. Only then did he remember the opponent Yin Biyue had spared today was a disciple from Lianjian Sect. He had complained under his breath, but it couldn't escape the ears of someone on her way to Great Ascension. Among the spectators of the match, *she* held the highest level of cultivation. She might have only glared, but it was an expression laden with menace. The Baopu Sect elder clamped his mouth shut.

The Qinglu Sword Sect elder had something to say as well. "It's a good thing that the Sword Sage has such a disciple."

The Lianjian Sect elder dropped her intimidation and turned to Qu Duiyan with warmth. The elder had watched the match with sharp perception, and she would explain the outcome to her niece. “Your shidi poured all of his strength into the final strike. The vital qi shielding him had already dissipated to nothing. If Yin Biyue’s attack landed, your shidi would be unable to wield his dao for at least a year. Even with your mother’s golden-jade dew, it’d take him half a year to recover.”

Her tone shifted to one of caution. “No matter who you fight in the future, unless it’s a life-and-death battle, never disperse your vital qi armor. You will only put yourself in grave danger. While Yin Biyue is clearly kind, he puts up a cold front and is stubborn with his speech. He couldn’t even do a favor properly. Do not follow his example in the future.”

“I understand, Aunt. You are wise,” Qu Duiyan said, obedient as ever.

Her elder nodded in satisfaction. However, in Qu Duiyan’s heart, she thought about the cold-faced yet warmhearted youth and couldn’t help but smile. She thought he was lovely, whether he was soft or socially awkward. He was different—one of a kind.

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NO MATTER WHAT people thought, the third round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament continued on. The thrilling match soon faded into history. Nonetheless, teahouses and taverns continued to discuss it. The first time Yihu was drawn, it possessed enough of the strength of mountains to

break apart the moon. It was truly a force to be reckoned with. But which was sharper, Yihu or Fengyu?

This was a question that not even Yin Biyue himself could answer.

Sitting on a meditation cushion, he polished his sword with meticulous care. He replayed the details of the match in his head. It hadn't been his imagination; when Yihu had been unsheathed under the threat of "Seizing the Moon," the sword body had trembled, emitting a hum that sounded both hostile and angry.

The sword was mute and stubborn and still refused to accept his vital qi. If the legendary sword Linyuan from the Age of Sages were around, it probably wouldn't act as arrogantly.

Yin Biyue's spirits fell.

#shifu-there's-a-bug-in-the-sword-you-gave-me!

#i-gotta-have-a-good-talk-with-it

***

SEVEN DAYS LATER, the third round of the Flower-Plucking Tournament concluded. After Yin Biyue's fight, Qu Duiyan didn't show up at the matches again. Many marveled at their fleeting encounters with a beauty and wondered if they would meet again in this lifetime.

There should have been forty participants advancing to the next round, but because a couple of matches had ended in mutual defeat, and one winner forfeit, only thirty-six participants advanced. Before the draw for the fourth round, the competing disciples had three days to rest and regroup.

Qinglu Sword Sect also needed to allocate manpower to repair the rings and reinforce their protection barriers.

More visiting cultivators arrived in Ye City, most of whom were waiting to watch the next round of fights. The black-armored guards had increased their daily patrols, and the city's taverns, shops, and gambling houses were flourishing. The number of disciples from various sects who'd been eliminated or had come to watch the tournament far exceeded those still competing. Many who were freed from the stress of the competition enjoyed placing small bets at gambling houses. A bit of betting did no harm, and it served to support their own sects, as well as adding excitement to their cultivation lives.

Although the matchups for the next round of the tournament weren't out yet, many knew about the confrontation at the tavern several days prior. Tempest Sword Zhong Shan and the Sword Sage's disciple Yin Biyue were destined to face each other, so the betting pools opened early.

Yin Biyue's performance in the previous match dispelled any rumors of qi deviation wrecking his cultivation. As a result, the odds between him and Zhong Shan weren't too far apart. However, since Zhong Shan was higher in cultivation level, more people wagered on him. With the previous round's results, some had questioned whether his late-Breakthrough state was actually halfway to Small Ascension.

Meanwhile, beside Qiushui Lake, Luo Mingchuan and Yin Biyue continued their routine of cultivation, sword practice, and guiding the chatterbox. Duan Chongxuan was busy cultivating, practicing the sword, and being guided. In his spare time, he had gone to the gambling house to place a hefty bet on his Sishixiong. This resulted in his image of a young,

handsome, and rich boy growing ever larger in the hearts of Ye City's maidens.

Only the Baopu Sect disciples didn't participate in this city-wide betting frenzy. It wasn't because they were devoted to cultivation and transcending base desires. In the match between Yin Biyue and He Lai, they had borrowed a hefty sum from a money house to bet on He Lai's victory. When they lost the bet, they couldn't scrape together the funds in time, and it had been the team-leading elder who dug into his own pockets to repay the debt.

This incident was reported back to the Hengduan Mountains in the Western Continent. The grand elders of the sect sent letters rebuking them for their embarrassing behavior, and the Baopu Sect disciples dared not gamble again.

The hottest days of summer were nearly over, and the early autumn winds that blew through the city every evening were chilly. The people of Ye City brought out bamboo chairs to the streets to lounge in the shade, fanning themselves and cracking melon seeds as they chatted about the latest Flower-Plucking Tournament gossip. The bright, colorful lanterns of brothels shone brilliantly, the vendors of the city's center began their preparations for the night market, and lights in the mansions of wealthy households were also lit early.

The Cangya disciples by Qiushui Lake ended their day of sword practice and cultivation. Some returned indoors to prepare for meditation, while others went downtown to join in on Ye City's bustling evening.

The last rays of the setting sun bathed the lake in a golden light as birds returned to their nests. In the distance, smoke rose from the chimneys

of white-walled, gray-tiled residential courtyards. As the people by the lake filtered away, so too did the sound of laughter. Silence descended upon Qiushui Lake in this hour of twilight. Only the occasional breeze stirred the branches of lakeside willows.

So far, today had been no different from any other day. Yet it was also destined to change because of the girl standing under a willow tree.

No one knew when she had arrived, or how long she stood there. She appeared so quietly that not even the evening breeze or the weeping willows noticed. She wore a purple long robe with expansive sleeves and a fitted waist, the hems of which were embroidered with intricate floral patterns. The hairpin in her hair was neither wood nor jade, but its end was adorned with a round, lustrous pearl that glistened in the setting sun.

When a white-haired youth emerged from the small courtyard, walking toward the lake holding his sword, she smiled.

Her smile was akin to the arrival of spring. No matter how graceful the willow, could it compare to the supple beauty of her dimples? No matter how resplendent the lake, could it compare to the brightness of her eyes?

Chapter 42

YIN BIYUE WALKED OUT of the small courtyard and began his daily sword practice. The lakeside was usually quiet and peaceful without a soul around save for the occasional distant calls of cuckoos at this hour. But today, Qiushui Lake seemed to glow with an inexplicable brilliance. His eyes followed the light to find someone standing under the willow tree: a smiling girl who called out to him.

"Yin-shixiong."

Anyone would've recognized this girl, but Yin Biyue wasn't anyone. That day during his match, he hadn't looked around the platform. All he knew of her were the Lianjian Sect robes she wore. He approached and stopped at a polite distance. "Who are you?"

Since they had never met, it would've been more appropriate for her to address him as "Yin-daoyou"[34] instead of "Yin-shixiong." And any other girl, seeing his knit brow and cold, clueless expression, would've felt offended and left. Qu Duiyan just smiled graciously.

"My name is Qu Duiyan. 'Qu' as in the Qujiang River and 'Duiyan' as in 'Yangliu Duiyang'—*dense willows.*"

Even Yin Biyue, who had no clue about the seven of Baopu's Seven, knew who she was now. Qujiang was the name of a river but also the name of a Second Sage. Yang Liu was the name of Lianjian Sect's leader—and the name of Qu Duiyan's mother.

When Qu Duiyan introduced herself, she was straightforward and humble. Since she'd made a good impression on Yin Biyue, he offered to

help her. “You must be here for Duan-shidi. I’ll call him for you.”

Qu Duiyan paused for a moment. “I’m not here to see Duan-daoyou.”

Yin Biyue paused too. If a girl wasn’t here for Duan Chongxuan… was she here for Luo Mingchuan? For some reason, that soured his mood a little. “Who are you here for, then?”

“You, Yin-shixiong,” replied Qu Duiyan.

“*Me…?* What for?”

Qu Duiyan took a step forward. “Are you married?” she asked as if she were asking if he had eaten dinner.

“Mm, no,” Yin Biyue replied cautiously. He hadn’t yet recovered from her first question when the next one hit him full force.

“What do you think of me, Yin-shixiong?”

Yin Biyue’s mind ground to a halt. In his long life as a villain, never had he encountered “being confessed to by a girl.” No, never mind a confession. As one of the many background extras behind the boss, he wasn’t even in line for the female lead to spit on him.

So…had he just unlocked some hidden storyline? *Please tell me this isn’t real* kept looping in Yin Biyue’s head.

Seeing him quiet, Qu Duiyan chose to smile and wait rather than rush him.

“Qu-daoyou, are you mistaken?” Yin Biyue finally managed to ask.

“I’m not,” Qu Duiyan said. Her eyes grew supplicating. “Is there something wrong with me?”

Yin Biyue had *really* never encountered a situation like this before. He was flustered. “N-no, you’re great. It’s me…” If only Luo Mingchuan or

Duan Chatterbox were here! He struggled to express himself, but he eventually rallied. “I don’t feel the same way.”

Qu Duiyan was undeterred. “The path of cultivation is long. Wouldn’t it be better to have a partner walk it with you? You don’t know me right now, Yin-shixiong, but if you give me a chance, we might get along just fine.”

That made so much sense. He couldn’t refute it. Yin Biyue forced himself to calm down.

“I know you’re a wonderful girl. Your cultivation, background, and appearance are all laudable. In the future, you’ll find someone who shares your feelings and will walk the path of cultivation with you for centuries to come, someone to accompany you through your long years of life… But that person isn’t me.”

At last, tears fell from Qu Duiyan’s eyes. “Yin-shixiong, are you rejecting me because you have someone you like?”

Truth be told, Yin Biyue didn’t know why he had rejected her either. Perhaps because the Sword Sage had not returned for so long that various powers were eyeing the Cangya Mountains covetously. The world’s stability was uncertain, and he still had so much to do. Or it might have been for a reason not even he understood…

Nonetheless, he was resolute. “Yes.”

“How nice!” Qu Duiyan broke into a smile. “You’ll have to invite me to your union ceremony in the future, Yin-shixiong. If she doesn’t cherish your feelings, I’ll come snatch you away.”

Yin Biyue thought her smile looked sad. Hurting a young girl was a cruel thing to do, regardless of the reason. He felt around his sleeves, took

out a handkerchief, and offered it to her.

Qu Duiyan accepted the handkerchief and wiped her tears. Clutching it tightly in her hands, she said, “I’ll be going now.”

Yin Biyue watched her walk alongside the lake, strands of her black hair dancing in the night air, her back tall and straight. When he turned away from the sight, he found Luo Mingchuan standing by the courtyard entrance. He seemed to have been there for some time.

The setting sun washed everything with gold, yet he stood there in the shadowed corner of the courtyard wall, his expression unreadable.

Softly, he called, “Shidi.”

***

QU DUIYAN WALKED by the lake, feeling dejected. Suddenly, a crisp voice rang out behind her.

“Hey. Don’t be sad.”

Qu Duiyan whirled around to find two girls dressed in Cangya’s white robes. One was vibrant like spring blossoms while the other was dainty like a white lotus.

“You were following me?” Qu Duiyan asked. Under normal circumstances, she would’ve detected them much sooner. But her emotions were in turmoil and she hadn’t been paying attention.

He Yanyun rolled her eyes. “Who’s following you? I was just worried you’d take things too hard and throw yourself into the lake.” She handed

her a grease-paper packet. “Here, I just bought these. They’re still hot. Want some?”

Qu Duiyan glanced at it—the packet contained pieces of candied curds. It seemed the girls had been on their way back to Qiushui Lake after their shopping and witnessed her rejection. Other girls would have been mortified, but Qu Duiyan’s personality was like her mother’s. Someone who had no qualms about asking questions like “*What do you think of me?*” wasn’t the type to lash out due to shame either.

She instead targeted the candied curds. “These are children’s snacks. I have no taste for them. How can you still eat like this? As cultivators, indulging in such cravings—”

He Yanyun withdrew her hand. “Xiaolian, let’s dig in.”

Qu Duiyan snatched the packet back. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t eat it…” She’d lost.

As they snacked together, Qu Duiyan studied the two girls. They were so beautiful, she couldn’t help herself. She had to know. “Yin-shixiong said he has someone he likes. Who is it? Is it one of you?”

Ruan Xiaolian snickered. “Of course not. Look at the words embroidered on the handkerchief.”

Qu Duiyan raised her eyebrows. “Radiant as a pearl. Flawless as jade. What does it mean?”

“The ‘ming’ in ‘mingzhu’—*pearl*—is the same as my shixiong Luo Mingchuan’s ‘ming.’ The ‘bi’ in ‘baibi’—*jade bi*—refers to Yin-shixiong,” He Yanyun explained.

Qu Duiyan was shocked. “So that’s how it is!”

In the cultivation world, it wasn’t unheard of for men to join in union, though they were few in number. She accepted the explanation, though not without disappointment. “I’ve met Luo-shixiong before. He’s a true gentleman. He seems like a very, very good person. In that case… I guess I never had a chance.”

“You’re so pretty,” He Yanyun said. “And you’re talented in cultivation too. Why worry about one person’s tastes?”

Qu Duiyan slumped at those words and stopped snacking on the curds. With a light push of her toes, she leaped onto the hanging willows that dangled over the shore, settling on a branch like a weightless wind. The branch quivered when she first landed but soon stilled.

Worried Qu Duiyan would abscond with their candied curds, He Yanyun circulated her vital qi and sprang up to the tree with Ruan Xiaolian in tow. The three maidens sat shoulder to shoulder on the giant willow. The colors of twilight faded into night, and the moon rose on the horizon.

Qu Duiyan gazed at the shimmering lake, then heaved a sigh. “I don’t think I’ll ever get married.”

“No way,” He Yanyun said, eyeing her. “You’re so young. One rejection can’t crush you like this.”

“What do you know?” Qu Duiyan rolled her eyes. “This isn’t my first! It’s my second!”

He Yanyun had to acknowledge beauty when she saw it. Qu Duiyan was stunning even when she rolled her eyes, so He Yanyun was genuinely surprised. Was there someone who could reject such a beauty *aside* from Yin-shixiong? Her desire for gossip bubbled up.

“Who was the first one?”

Ruan Xiaolian remained expressionless, but she secretly perked up her ears.

Qu Duiyan had never told anyone about this before—not even her father knew about it. Maybe she felt obligated to return the favor for the snacks or maybe the mood was just right. To her own surprise, she spilled the beans.

“The first one was my shidi, Chen Yi.”

“Huh?!” Ruan Xiaolian gasped in shock.

He Yanyun knew why Ruan Xiaolian was surprised. She also found Chen Yi to be too…ordinary. If he wasn’t holding his dao, no one would notice him in a crowd.

“He’s older than me and higher in cultivation level, but he entered the sect late, so he’s ‘Shidi,’ okay? I’m not some old cow eating young grass…” Qu Duiyan said, misunderstanding their surprise. “But confessing is so hard. My mom succeeded on her first try, so why do I keep getting rejected?”

He Yanyun gave her a hearty pat on the shoulder.

“What’s the big deal? I used to have a crush on Luo-shixiong, but I realized later that… It’s like when you see a flower and you think it’s pretty, so you want to own it. You really only like the way it looks. It’s a form of admiration, not love.”

Ruan Xiaolian resonated deeply with that sentiment. “When I was little, I wanted to marry the chef at the roasted chicken shop down the mountain. I just liked the way he cooked chicken. That’s not love either.”

The night deepened and the bright moon illuminated the land with a pure, clean glow. Qu Duiyan stared at the lake, thinking.

“Now that you mention it, that makes sense,” she admitted. “I only saw Yin-shixiong once in the ring. How could that be love?”

The three maidens began to reminisce about their forgotten, distant, naive first loves. As their voices wove through the air, even the lake seemed to turn hazy.

“Why did you confess to Chen Yi?” He Yanyun asked.

“When I was eight, I went to visit Headmaster-xiansheng with my dad. I saw him bandaging a kitten in the academy and ran over to play with him. He gave me candy, so I asked if he would take my hand in marriage. He refused.”

“Are you serious? Eight?! That’s too young!”

“So what? I was already drop-dead gorgeous at eight!”

“You’re so vain. Give me back my curds.”

Qu Duiyan burst out laughing. She leaped from the willow branch and alighted upon the lake’s surface. “This is the last piece!” she crowed before scampering away.

He Yanyun and Ruan Xiaolian hurried after her.

***

YIN BIYUE SENSED something off about the look in Luo Mingchuan’s eyes, but he couldn’t put his finger on what it was. As they gazed at one another, standing amid the evening breeze by the lake, neither of them moved to speak.

Luo Mingchuan was aware that he wasn’t quite in his right mind, but he couldn’t stop it. His feelings were out of control.

As he’d listened by the courtyard entrance to his shidi and Qu Duiyan talk, he was seized by the urge to push the door open and interrupt them. This emotion startled him. He asked himself: *What right do I have to interfere? On what grounds?*

He’d restrained himself, but it left him miserable.

With the Sword Sage absent from Cangya, the world was on the brink of chaos. His shidi entering into a relationship with the daughter of Lianjian Sect’s Second Sage would be beneficial to Xihua Peak and the Cangya Mountains as a whole. Luo Mingchuan felt he needed power. Great power. Power strong enough to change the world’s order without considering anyone or anything else. Nevertheless…

He was glad his shidi rejected Miss Qu. Luo Mingchuan opened the door to see Yin Biyue bathed in the sunset glow, alone. Luo Mingchuan’s tumultuous feelings rushed to his head, tossing and rushing like ocean waves in a storm.

Yin Biyue broke the silence.

“Shixiong, what happened to the courtyard’s threshold?”

Luo Mingchuan glanced back to see a mound of fine dust that vaguely resembled the outlines of the threshold. When a small breeze swept past, the dust scattered.

He coughed into his hand. “It’s just old and worn, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.” Yin Biyue’s gut told him that he’d better go along with Luo Mingchuan’s explanation. Unbeknownst to him, if he had delayed turning his head for a moment longer, the entire courtyard probably would have been reduced to the same sad state.

“Are you free right now, Shixiong? There’s a move in the Cangya Sword Manual that I don’t quite get. Can you help me with it?”

Luo Mingchuan smiled easily, the upward curve of his lips embracing the gentle breeze and the bright moon of the summer night.

“Sure.”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Villain's White Halo
VOLUME 2

Character Guide & Glossary

Character Guide

XIANXIA

This story is primarily set in a xianxia world. Xianxia is a fantasy genre that heavily features Daoist themes of cultivation and the pursuit of immortality with more emphasis on the supernatural than martial arts. Its characters often strive to become stronger through cultivation, obtaining higher and higher cultivation levels, the fearsome powers of which are defined differently by each author.

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

YIN BIYUE 殷璧越: A soul that has transmigrated to countless worlds as an insignificant villain. With the “Fiend Halo,” he is determined to become the ultimate Final Boss in the xianxia world he now occupies.

LUO MINGCHUAN 洛明川: The wholesome protagonist of the xianxia world Yin Biyue entered. He is the chief disciple of the Cangya Mountains and Xiqian Peak.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

THE REBIRTH COMPANY

BI MUNING 碧霖宁: The Rebirth Company’s boss and founder.

CHENG XIAOBAI 程小白: An employee of the Rebirth Company.

LIU XIAODAI 刘小呆: An employee of the Rebirth Company who makes a deal with Yin Biyue.

WANG WEI 王伟: A tech intern at the Rebirth Company.

THE CANGYA MOUNTAINS

CHENG ANTAI 程安泰: The peak lord of Xiling Peak who manages the Disciplinary Hall.

CHENG XI 程西: A disciple from the Disciplinary Hall.

DUAN CHONGXUAN 段崇轩: The chatty fifth disciple of Xihua Peak.

HE YANYUN 何嫣芸: Luo Mingchuan's younger martial sister from Xiqian Peak.

ELDER CHENG 程长老: The peak lord of Xiping Peak.

ELDER NING 宁长老: A medical cultivator.

JUN YU 君煜: The stoic chief disciple of Xihua Peak.

LIU QISHUANG 柳欺霜: The martial-arts-focused second disciple of Xihua Peak.

RUAN XIAOLIAN 阮小莲: A food-loving disciple who is He Yanyun's friend.

WEI JINGFENG 卫惊风: The renowned Sword Sage and the peak lord of Xihua Peak. Absent.

YAN XING 燕行: The wayward third disciple of Xihua Peak who wields a changdao.

ZHENGYANGZI 正阳子: The sect leader and the peak lord of Xiqian Peak.

OTHER SECTS/FACTIONS

CHEN YI 陈逸: A disciple of Lianjian Sect who wields the changdao.

CHENG TIANYU 程天羽: The child prodigy of Qinglu Sword Sect, called the “Featherlight Sword.”

CHU HUAN 褚浣: A disciple of Lianjian Sect and a spiritual cultivator.

HEADMASTER-XIANSHENG 掌院先生: A Second Sage who presides over Lanyuan Academy.

HE LAI 何来: A disciple of Baopu Sect. He is ranked fifth in the “Baopu Seven.”

LI LIN 李麟: A disciple of Baopu Sect. Nicknamed the “Little Bully of the Hengduan Mountains.”

LIN YUANGUI 林远归: The chief disciple of Baopu Sect. He is ranked first in the “Baopu Seven.”

QU DUIYAN 曲堆烟: The beautiful daughter of Lianjian Sect’s leader and the Second Sage Qu Jiang.

QU JIANG 曲江: The Second Sage of Lianjian Sect and Qu Duiyan’s father.

SONG TANG 宋棠: The junior sect leader of Qinglu Sword Sect with a grudge against Yan Xing.

YE ZHIQIU 叶之秋: The city master of Ye City.

ZHENG WEI 郑渭: A disciple of Baopu Sect. He is ranked second of the “Baopu Seven.”

ZHONG SHAN 钟山: A disciple of Qinglu Sword Sect, called the “Tempest Sword.”

Name Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

Family

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIFU: Teacher or master. Literal meaning is “martial father.” For one’s master in one’s own sect.

SHIBO: Martial uncle. Used for someone who is older than one’s master.

SHISHU: Martial uncle. For junior martial siblings of the speaker’s master, including women.

SHIZHI: Martial nephew or niece. For disciples of the speaker’s martial sibling.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIJIE: Older martial sister, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SEQUENCING: When there is more than one sect member under the same teacher, seniority is determined by when one joined the sect. Immediate martial siblings address each other using sequential numbers according to seniority rather than by direct names. The eldest is given “Da,” then “Er” for second oldest, and so on.

Example: Yin Biyue is the fourth disciple of Xihua Peak. His shixiong and shijie refer to him as “Sishidi.” His shidi, Duan Chongxuan, refers to him as “Sishixiong.”

1: Da

2: Er

3: San

4: Si

5: Wu

Other

DAOYOU: A fellow peer of the Dao.

GONGZI: A young man from an affluent household.

XIANSHENG: A term of address for men, originally only for those of great learning or those who had made significant contributions to society. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *The Villain’s White Halo.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

Yīn Bìyuè

Yīn as in **yin** (with a drawn out n)

Bì as in **bee**, yu as in **you**, è as in w**e**t

Luò Míngchuān

Lu as in **loo**p, ò as in **oh**

M as in **m**e, íng as in r**ing**, chuā as in a**choo**, n as in ru**n**

Duàn Chóngxuān

Du as in **do**, àn as in **Ann**

Ch as in **ch**urch, óng as in l**ong** (with a slight nasal sound), xu as in **shoe**, ān as in wh**en**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

ARRAY: Area-of-effect magic circles. Anyone within the array falls under the effect of the array's associated spell(s).

CHANGDAO: Though considered a "knife" in Chinese, it is commonly regarded in English as a two-handed, single-edged sword. It is often translated as "Chinese long saber."

CROWNING CEREMONY: The ceremony marking the coming-of-age for boys at the age of twenty, when they are conferred a "crown."

CULTIVATION: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial artists who seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also attaining personal strength. Each stage of their enlightenment is called 'level' or 'state.'

The levels in this novel are:

Qi Cultivation

Marrow Purification

Spirit Concentration

Breakthrough

Small Ascension

Great Ascension

Second Sage

Sage

Immortal

CULTIVATION MANUAL: Cultivation manuals provide detailed instructions on secret or advanced training techniques and are sought out by those who wish to advance their cultivation levels.

DRAGON VEIN: Underground channels of natural spiritual energy that flow through mountain ranges.

HAND SEAL: Refers to various hand and finger gestures used by cultivators to cast spells or while meditating. A cultivator may be able to control their sword remotely with a hand seal.

JIANGHU: Describes the greater underground society of martial artists and associates that spans the entire setting's world. Members of the jianghu self-govern and settle issues among themselves based on the tenets of strength and honor, though this may not stop them from exerting influence over conventional society too.

MERIDIANS: The means by which qi travels through the body, similar to a bloodstream. Some medical and combat techniques target the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints, which allows them to redirect, manipulate, or halt qi circulation. Halting a cultivator's qi

circulation prevents them from using their internal cultivation until the block is lifted. Most cultivators have a single spiritual meridian, but more advanced cultivators may have more.

QI: Qi is the energy in all living things. Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation. Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do powerful damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual senses to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to feel for potential danger.

VITAL QI: The essential life force cultivated to use as power.

SEA OF CONCEPTION: Also known as the conception vessel or dantian, it is the core in which qi is conceived. It is located in the bowel area.

QIANKUN: Taking from the Daoist Eight Trigrams wherein Qian and Kun symbolize Heaven and Earth respectively, the name is used to refer to

magical items that provide unlimited storage space. Examples include pouches, the sleeve of a robe, magical jewelry, a weapon, and more.

QI DEVIATION: Refers to a situation where one's cultivation enters a perilous, highly volatile state. This is usually the result of using risky, incorrect, or high-level cultivation techniques that are beyond the practitioner's ability to handle, but can also be triggered by unstable emotions or overtaxing oneself in battle. Qi deviation is heavily damaging to the body and comes with the risk of death.

SECLUSION: Also known as "closed-door meditation," seclusion or secluded cultivation is when a cultivator isolates themselves from the rest of the world to meditate and further their internal cultivation. Often used to heal injuries or take cultivation to the next level.

SOLAR TERM: Refers to the twenty-four periods that reflect a change in season in accordance with an astronomical event or natural phenomenon.

TALISMANS: Strips of paper with incantations written on them, often using cinnabar ink or blood. They can serve as seals or be used as one-time spells.

Footnotes

Chapter 2

[1] Shidi means “younger martial brother.” Used for younger disciples or classmates.

[2] Shixiong means “older martial brother.” Used for older disciples or classmates.

[3] Shijie means “older martial sister.” Used for older disciples or classmates.

[4] Er- means “two.” In conjunction with shijie, it denotes the second older martial sister.

[5] Da- means “big,” and is used for the eldest or most senior among peers. In conjunction with shixiong, it denotes the first-ranked older martial brother.

[6] A reference to Gundam SEED. When the SEED mode is activated, the individual enters an enhanced state of awareness and physical ability.

Chapter 3

[7] Shimei means “younger martial sister.” Used for younger disciples or classmates.

Chapter 5

[8] Shishu means “martial uncle.” For junior martial siblings of the speaker’s master, including women.

Chapter 6

[9] Shamate is the Chinese subculture influenced by the West’s Emo culture and Japan’s Visual Kei scene.

[10] Wu- means “five.” In conjunction with shidi, it denotes the fifth younger martial brother

Chapter 7

[11] Shizhi means “martial nephew or niece.” For disciples of the speaker’s martial sibling.

[12] The lower abdominal area where qi is formed. Also known as the sea of conception or dantian.

[13] Si- means “four.” In conjunction with shixiong, it denotes the fourth older martial brother. In conjunction with shidi, it denotes the fourth younger martial brother

Chapter 8

[14] Da- means “big,” and is used for the eldest or most senior among peers. In conjunction with shixiong, it denotes the first-ranked older martial brother.

[15] San- means “three.” In conjunction with shixiong, it denotes the third older martial brother.

[16] An ancient form of Chinese divination, rooted in Daoism and calculated over a 3×3 cosmic

board of squares that correspond to the nine ways that individuals seek satisfaction.

Chapter 9

[17] Lao- is a prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts. Used with Yin Biyue’s seniority ranking in this instance.

[18] From “Congratulations to the Groom: I Am Old and Worn” by Xin Qiji, Southern Song Dynasty.

Chapter 10

[19] A formal calligraphy style with regular script that was prominent for a brief period during the Ming Dynasty.

[20] Xiansheng is a respectful address conferred to a man who was born earlier or a teacher.

Chapter 11

[21] Approximately 10 feet.

Chapter 15

[22] Shibo means “martial uncle.” Used for someone older than one’s master.

Chapter 16

[23] Gege means “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer or used as a suffix.

Chapter 18

[24] From Caigentan, a compilation of aphorisms by Hong Zicheng, Ming Dynasty.

Chapter 21

[25] A changdao is a Chinese long saber.

[26] A reference to the poem “Venting” by Du Mu, Tang Dynasty.

Chapter 27

[27] A magicked space for storage in one’s sleeve.

Chapter 30

[28] From “Linjiang Immortal: Willow Catkins” by Cao Xueqin, Qing dynasty.

Chapter 33

[29] A verse from “Reminiscence at Dusk in Autumn” by Tao Zongliang, Qing Dynasty.

Chapter 36

[30] A quote from “Forever Joy: Reminiscing the Past at Beigu Gazebo at the Capital’s Entrance” by Xin Qiji, Southern Song Dynasty.

Chapter 37

[31] From “Ode to the Moon” by Xie Zhuang, Northern and Southern Dynasties.

Chapter 38

[32] Major Heat is divided into three periods: decaying grass transforming into fireflies, moist and muggy soil, and heavy rain falls.

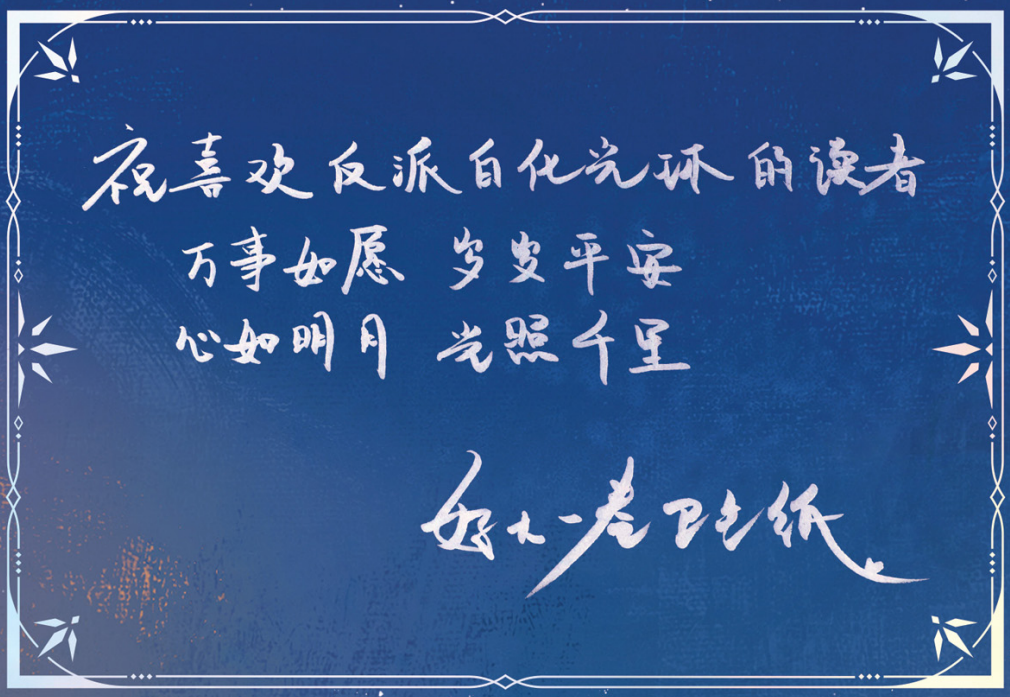
These are folk expressions indicating the change in weather during this period.

Chapter 40

[33] A verse from “Farewell to Uncle Yun at Xietiao Pavilion in Xuan Prefecture” by Li Bai, Tang Dynasty.

Chapter 42

[34] Daoyou is a term of address for a fellow peer of the Dao.



To the readers of *The Villain's White Halo*:
Wishing you receive all that you desire—
peace and health forevermore,
a mind as clear as the brilliant moon,
and light that shines for a thousand miles.

Hao Da Yi Juan Wei Sheng Zhi

HE WANTED TO BE *FEARED*. INSTEAD, HE'S ADORED.

Yin Biyue feels scammed. After dying as a two-bit villain in a multitude of worlds, he dreamed of becoming the Final Boss in the next world he's reborn into. Unfortunately, the malevolent Fiend Halo he purchased from the Rebirth Company seems to be malfunctioning. Instead of inspiring fear in those who inhabit his new reality, his fellow cultivators see him as...a do-gooder. And this includes the bleeding-heart protagonist, Luo Mingchuan—the very man who Yin Biyue just tried to murder!

Before Yin Biyue knows it, he's surrounded by allies and the fallout of a misunderstanding that makes everyone in his cultivation sect think he's the victim. How is he supposed to achieve his dastardly dreams now?! Especially when the mysteries of his forgotten past keep popping up when he least expects them.

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